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A Thousand Leagues of Wind, the Sky at Dawn

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

by

Fuyumi Ono

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Prologue

Chapter 1

[0-1] Her mother dabbed her eyes. “Take care,” she said.

Suzu’s father and two older brothers remained steadfastly silent. Her younger sister and brother wouldn’t come out of the house. Standing at the door, Suzu could hear her grandmother comforting them.

“What’s all this carrying on?” said the man next to her. His was the only cheerful voice. “Aoyagi-sama is a wealthy man. He’ll dress you in fine clothes, teach you how to behave in polite society. When your apprenticeship is complete, you could become the kind of proper young lady able to go wherever she pleased without the slightest reservation.”

He laughed loudly. Turning her head to glance up at him, Suzu’s eyes took in the broken-down shack before them. The posts leaned. The thatched roof sagged. The dirt floor was divided into a mere two rooms, and everything inside leaned or sagged as well.

Theirs was an impoverished life. They were tenant farmers who farmed rice, with most of the yearly yield going to pay the rent. On top of that, the previous year’s harvest had proved meager. When summer came again, ears did not appear on the stalks. It being impossible to pay the rent, Suzu was indentured as a servant. Not her seventeen-year-old brother or her eleven-year-old sister or any of her other nine siblings. But Suzu, fourteen years old according to the traditional lunar calendar. Only twelve counting the years from her birth.

“Well, let’s get going.”

At the man’s urging, Suzu bowed. She said no farewells. She wouldn’t be able to hold back the tears if she tried. She steeled her gaze and refused to blink. She looked at her home and memorized the faces she saw there.

“Take care,” her mother said again and wiped her face with her sleeve.

With that, Suzu turned around. Her weeping mother, her stubbornly morose

brothers—she understood now that none of them would be stepping forward to hold her back.

Suzu trudged silently after the man as they passed through the outskirts of the village. It was almost noon and they'd already reached the limits of the world she knew. The trail cut up the slopes from the foot of the mountain. Suzu had never set foot beyond the remote mountain pass.

"You're a good kid. None of this weeping and wailing. That's what I like to see."

The man's cheerful attitude never flagged. He walked with long strides, saying whatever came to his mind. "Tokyo is a great city. You've probably never seen gaslight, huh? The estate you're going to, you'll be able to ride on a street car as well. Do you even know what a horse-draw trolley is?"

Suzu ignored him. To keep herself from looking back over her shoulder, she focused on the man's shadow and let his pace drag her along. When they drew apart, she would catch up in a flurry of tiny steps and tread with satisfaction on the silhouette of the man's head.

Repeating this over and over, they crossed the mountain pass. Starting down the other side, the shadow of the man's head disappeared. He'd stopped to look up at the sky.

Clouds raced across the sky from behind them. The shadow Suzu had been walking on grew faint.

"Looks like rain."

They both glanced back at where they had come from. A shadow climbed the luxuriant, tree-covered slopes from the village. The shadow of the clouds stuck to their heels, almost as if the rain were pursuing. A warm breeze began to blow. Drops of rain drummed on the road.

"Well, this is unfortunate," the man said, and dashed to a giant camphor tree growing along the side of the road. Suzu hugged her personal belongings to her chest—wrapped in a *furoshiki* cloth—and followed after him. The big drops of rain thudded against her cheeks and shoulders. Almost as soon as she reached the cover of the branches, the squall turned into a driving downpour.

Suzu scrunched up her neck and ran toward the base of the tree. The twisting

trunk jutting out of the ground provided some cover as well. Probably because the roots had been worn smooth by any number of travelers stopping here to catch their breath, she lost her footing.

Oh, don't trip, she thought, even as she pitched forward and was sent sprawling. Her toes caught on another root. She started to fall. Her feet slipped out from under her. Suzy skittered up to the end of a precipice in a little dance.

"Hey, watch out!"

Halfway through the warning, the man's voice turned into a shout. Where the trunk of the huge camphor tree split apart was an embankment steep enough to be called a cliff. Suzy teetered there on the edge. She dropped everything and reached out for the man's hands, a nearby branch, a clump of bushes—anything. She'd couldn't grab hold and was about to tumble in when a sheet of rain struck her.

The torrent roared in her ears like standing underneath a waterfall.

Suzu's memory was intact up until the moment she felt herself fall. Her head spun. The flood of water bodily picked up her and tossed her about. When she came to herself again, she seemed to be half-submerged in a river. But what river? She couldn't touch the bottom. The water filling her mouth was salty.

The dark water swallowed her up. She lost consciousness. When she next opened her eyes, she was resting on a gently swaying bed. A handful of men stared down at her.

Suzu roused herself with a start. The concerned looks on the faces of the men softened. They said something she didn't understand. She sat up and took in her surroundings. Her mouth dropped open in amazement. She was on a platform of old boards that barely jutted above the surface of the water. Raising her eyes, she saw that the black water went on forever, meeting the sky at the distant horizon in a straight line. Never before in her life had she seen such a wide expanse of sea.

She searched for the big camphor tree. Behind her was a cliff so high she had to crane her neck to take it in. The cliff was deeply rutted. Here and there, white threads of water streamed down the ragged face. The wide platform of boards was built out from the foot of the cliff. Piers lined the outer edge of the deck.

The small dock held three small boats.

Her only thought was that she'd somehow washed down the river and ended up in the ocean. That's what would happen if she floated all the way down a river, or so she'd heard. The river would get bigger and bigger and eventually empty into the ocean.

The ocean.

The water was black as night. She placed her hands on the edge of the platform and stared into the water. It was nothing like the lakes or river she knew. Despite the amazingly clear water, she couldn't see the bottom. It continued on and on until it was swallowed up in a faraway blackness, where twinkling lights swam together in swarms.

Somebody called to her, gently jostled her shoulders. Suzy tore her gaze away from the ocean. The men looked at her with distressed expressions on their faces. One of them said something to her that she didn't understand.

Suzu replied with a blank look. "What? What are you saying?"

The men glanced at each other in noisy consternation. They all spoke at once, words flying back and forth. Suzy didn't comprehend a thing.

"Hey, where am I? I've got to get back. What's the best way to get back to my village from here? The road to Tokyo would do as well, I guess. Do any of you know where Aoyagi-sama lives?"

This set off another flurry of chatter amongst the men. Confused expressions clouded their countenances.

The men huddled together in a conference. Suzy sat down on the deck and took a closer look around.

The cliffs rose straight up as if the edge of the land had been torn off. The inner face of the cliff was hollowed out. There was a waterfall deep within the mountains near where she lived. The height of these cliffs far and away exceeded the slope of that waterfall. The cliffs stretched out to the right and left of her, almost seeming to enclose the floating platform.

Remove the decking and there would be no beach or base of the cliffs to be

seen, only this huge raft-like dock jutting out from beneath the cliffs. Boats were tied up where the raft met the water. In the other direction, where the raft touched the cliffs, was a line of small houses.

That makes sense, Suzu thought to herself. There was no beach so they built a beach. But how would anyone climb that cliff? When she tilted her head back and squinted, there were stone steps and ladders running up the cliff face. That must be how they got up and down.

"Climbing a ladder like that would make my head spin," Suzu muttered to herself.

The men glanced back at her. Pointing, they drew her attention to the top of the cliffs. Then they escorted her across the platform to the stone steps carved into the face of the precipice.

That was the beginning of her gauntlet. She climbed the face of the cliff. Whenever she wanted to stop and sit down, somebody gave her a push from behind or somebody ahead of her pulled her up. Glancing back over her shoulder and quelling the dizziness brought on by the towering heights, she finally struggled to the top.

"I'd hate to have to live here," Suzu said, plopping herself down on the ground. The men laughed and clapped her on the back and shoulders. She didn't understand anything they said. Maybe they were praising her for a good job done.

"I'd much rather work in the fields."

There had been nets spread out and drying on the decking, so she could imagine that they'd returned from fishing. Having to haul themselves up and down these cliffs every time they brought in a catch must be a horrible amount of hard work. Working in the fields wasn't easy but at least it was a quick jaunt out to the paddies across the causeways.

Along the top of the cliffs ran a stone wall much higher than she was tall. She was motioned toward a door off to the side, so she dragged her weary body along behind the other men and kept on going.

Inside the wall was a tiny village made up of a line of small shanties that looked

like row houses. She was taken to one of the shanties and handed over to the care of an old woman. The old woman stripped off Suzu's waterlogged clothes and pointed her towards a *futon* spread out on a platform raised above the dirt floor. Suzu obediently crawled under the futon. With Suzu's clothing in hand, the old woman left the hut. Suzu watched her leave and closed her eyes. She was exhausted.

I wonder if I'm going to make it to Tokyo? she thought as she fell asleep. I'd better get to Aoyagi-sama's house as soon as possible. After all, I was sold to him.

There was no other place for her to go to, no home for her to return to.

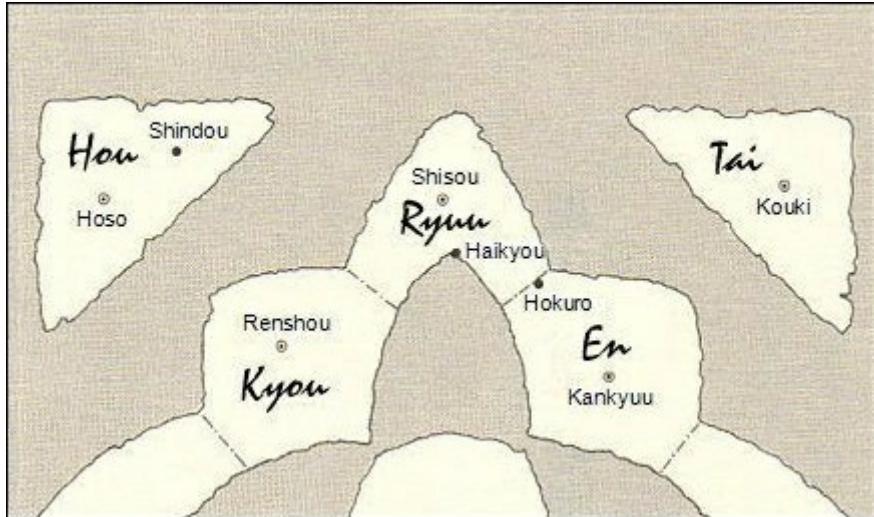
Suzu had no way of knowing that there was no such place as "Tokyo" in this world. The ocean she had nearly drowned in was the *Kyokai*, or the "Sea of Nothingness."

The place where she had finally arrived was the Eastern Kingdom of Kei.

Many years passed.

Chapter 2

[0-2] Amongst the lands of the Twelve Kingdoms, the one in the far northwest was known as Hou. More specifically, the Outland Kingdom of Hou.



The Kingdom of Hou was ruled by the Imperial Hou Chuutatsu. His family name was Son. His *uji*, the surname he'd selected at adulthood, was Ken. Ken Chuutatsu had served as a minister in the Imperial Cabinet (the *Rikkan*) and a commanding general in the Imperial Army.

After the passing of the previous emperor, he was chosen by Hourin and ascended to the throne as the Imperial Hou.

In the Sixth year of Eiwa, the reign of Chuutatsu had reached only thirty years. That year, Youshun Palace, the Imperial Seat, was stormed by a force of 100,000 soldiers. Unable to bear his tyrannical rule any longer, the armies of the eight province lords had risen up against him.

The like-minded citizens of the city opened the gates of Hoso, the capital city of Hou, and let them in. Almost immediately, they breached the palace perimeter to the inner sanctum where the soldiers of the eight provinces battled undauntedly with some three hundred of the emperor's bodyguards.

In the end, the Imperial Hou Chuutatsu was dead.

"What's the cause of all this commotion?"

Her mother's arms wrapped around her, Shoukei heard the bloodcurdling war cries. Shoukei was the daughter of Kaka, Chuutatsu's wife. The plaintive query

came from the prone and ailing Hourin, the kirin of Hou. The three of them were hiding in the depths of the palace.

"It came from outside. Mom, whose voice was that?"

Shoukei was thirteen years old. She was doted upon by her parents, the very apple of their eye. This young girl, bright and clever, beautiful and graceful, and praised as the veritable jewel of the crown—she twisted her face with dread.

"No . . . it can't be."

The people of Hou, provoked to revolt by the province lords, surrounded Hoso on all sides. The clanging of weapons echoed inside the palace walls, as did the curses they sang out against the emperor.

A surging tide of ashen blue armor. And those ferocious screams.

"It can't be! Father . . ."

"No!" Kaka held Shoukei tightly in her arms. "This is not happening!"

Kaka railed against the inconceivable. Overcome by the stench of blood, Hourin cried out disconsolately.

"Hourin!"

Hourin's pale face went white. "The emperor . . . the emperor is no longer with us."

In that same moment, in the heart of the palace, came the sound of a door opening.

The soldiers tread into the room, their armor smeared with blood. The design of the insignia worn by the young man at their lead was that of a constellation of stars, the coat of arms of the province lords.

"Such impudence!" Kaka shouted at him. "Where do you think you are? Heaven forbid you should be allowed for an instant in the presence of the empress consort and Taiho!"

The man's fearless young face hardly wavered. Without a word, he cast down before Kaka the thing he was carrying in his right hand. It struck the floor with a heavy thud and a splatter of blood and rolled next to Shoukei's feet. Bitter eyes

stared into space.

“Father!”

All emperors were promised immortality, but even an immortal emperor could not live once his head had been separated from his body. Shoukei and her mother screamed. They cast themselves upon the divan where Hourin lay.

The man laughed. “Do you find your father’s—your husband’s—visage so frightening?” he asked darkly.

Kaka stared him in the face. “Marquis Kei!” She corrected herself, addressing him more rudely by his name. “Gekkei! You bastard!”

Gekkei, province lord of Kei, lowered his voice and said coldly, “The Imperial Hou has been deposed. The time has come for the empress consort and the princess royal to part company.”

“What are you saying!” Kaka implored. Clinging to her mother’s arm, Shoukei trembled violently.

“The emperor who enacted cruel laws and oppressed his people and the empress consort who executed the blameless citizens who criticized him. They should both taste something of that suffering for themselves.”

“The emperor—the emperor did nothing but what was good for his subjects.”

“What good are laws that reward a child with death for stealing a loaf of bread? A child gasping beneath the weight of poverty, having no place else to turn? Or laws that treat a missed tax payment as a capital crime? Or laws that enslave a man and condemn him to death when he falls ill and cannot pull his load? Whatever you are feeling now is nothing compared to the horrors experienced by the people.”

Gekkei motioned with his hand. From the rear of the phalanx, a soldier ran up to Kaka and tore Shoukei from her arms. Shoukei wailed. Her mother cried bitterly.

“You envied other women their beauty and their wisdom. Or rather, feared that their daughters might prove more talented than your own. You slandered them with imaginary crimes. And now the earth resounds with their funeral

dirges. Can you begin to comprehend the grief of these families as the corpses of their loved ones were cast before them?"

"You bastard!" Kaka spat at him.

Gekkei paid the insult no mind. He turned to Shoukei, wriggling in the grip of the soldier. "You pay attention as well, young lady. Your miserable family always distanced itself from the scene of the crime. Have you the slightest idea what an execution is really like?"

"Stop it! Please . . . Mother!"

Shoukei's shrieks stirred not a soul, moved not heart in that place. Gasping, her eyes wide, she watched as Gekkei brandished the sword. Unable to look away even at the instant of impact, Shoukei witnessed the very moment when her mother's life left its body.

A scream frozen on its face, its mouth gasping a wordless cry into empty air, the severed head of her mother rolled against the head of the Imperial Hou Chuutatsu.

In that moment, Shoukei could not blink, could not speak. Gekkei cast her a disinterested glance and walked over to the divan where Hourin was resting. Hourin looked up at him with blank eyes.

"I wish you to understand as well the two generations of despair suffered by the people because of this black prince whom you chose."

Hourin stared at him hard, and quietly nodded. Gekkei bowed low in respect. Then he raised the sword above his head.

The Imperial Hou and Hourin Touka. Thus did the dynasty of the Kingdom of Hou draw a close.

Shoukei watched dumbfounded as the bodies were born away. No, to say she *watched* perhaps means only that the images continued to impinge upon her sight. She understood nothing of what she was seeing.

She sat listlessly on the floor. Gekkei stood before her. She raised her eyes, from the tip of his toes to the top of his head.

"Son Shou, daughter of the Imperial Hou, your name shall be deleted from the

Registry of Wizards."

Shoukei looked up at Gekkei's face. The reality of her mother's death hadn't sunk in. Now, on top of everything else, she'd lose her place in the Registry of Wizards. That meant that her body would once again begin to age normally. The thought terrified her. Her name had been listed in the Registry for at least thirty years. Where was she supposed to live now?

"No, please. Not that."

Gekkei glanced at her with a pitying expression. "If I leave you here like this, the people will surely tear you apart in revenge. I will list you on the census of a small province. You will be stripped of your social standing and your place in the Registry of Wizards. Your name will be changed. You will henceforth mingle with ordinary folk like everybody else."

With that, Gekkei turned to leave. Shoukei called after him, "Kill me also!" Her fingernails dug into the floor. "How am I supposed to go on living?" Gekkei did not turn around. Shoukei grasped the arm of the soldier. "This is too cruel!"

In one corner of the Youshun Palace complex was Godou palace. The lord of this palace was *Hakuchi*. The "White Pheasant." Because Hakuchi sang only twice in its entire life, the bird was also called "the two utterances." The first was, "The emperor is enthroned." The second was, "The emperor is dead." For that reason, it was also known as "the last word."

When Hakuchi of Godou palace uttered the last word, it fell dead. Gekkei cut off his feet.

The Imperial Seal itself contained a powerful charm. As one of the Imperial Regalia, only the emperor could use it. When the emperor died, the engravings on the seal turned smooth as glass, guaranteeing its silence until a new ruler sat upon the throne. Without the Imperial Seal, no laws or proclamations could be issued with any authority. In its place, one of Hakuchi's feet would be used instead.

During the regency of the eight province lords, a single document was sealed with the print of Hakuchi's foot. To wit, that the name of the Princess Royal Son Shou be removed from the Registry of Wizards.

Some three years passed.

Chapter 3

[0-3] At the top of the sky was an ocean called the Sea of Clouds. The Sea of Clouds divided the world above from the world below. From the world below, there was no way to tell that the Sea of Clouds was even there. Standing on a high mountain peak, the translucent azure blue of the broad expanse of the heavens might reveal itself to be, in fact, the lower depths of the Sea of Clouds. But very few mortal beings were capable of ascending such heights.

Nevertheless, almost all people understood that at the top of the sky was a real ocean called the Sea of Clouds and that it separated the heavens from the earth.

Within the Sea stretched a single band of clouds. The band of clouds, glimmering in a rainbow of colors, flowed toward the east. This was the *Zui-un*.

On a paddy causeway on a farm terraced into a ramshackle little hill, a young girl was cutting weeds. She took note of the clouds.

“Look, Keikei. It’s the *Zui-un*.” Rangyoku wiped the sweat from her brow and held up her hand, peering at the dazzling summer sky.

Gathering up the cut grass, the child next to her followed his older sister’s gaze and looked with amazement. He saw a beautiful cloud stretched across the southern sky.

“That’s the *Zui-un*?”

“It appears when a new empress enters the Imperial Palace. It means the cloud that accompanies good tidings.”

“Huh,” said Keikei, staring at the sky. As sister and brother watched the sky, the others busily cutting the summer grass in ones and twos across the paddies stopped and looked as well.

“A new empress is coming?”

“Must be. That bad empress we had before died. The new ruler has arrived. From Mount Hou, the empress will go to the palace in Gyouten.”

Nobody had any pity for the fallen empress. She'd been like a god to them, but all indications were that *this* empress, now divine, would bless them with wiser governance.

"Mount Hou is the home of the goddesses. It is in the center of the world."

"That's correct. You've studied well."

Keikei puffed out his chest a bit. "Yeah. Mount Hou is where the Taiho are born. The Taiho is a kirin. The kirin is the only one who can choose the new emperor." Keikei again leaned back and gazed up at the sky. "The goddess of Mount Hou is Heki . . . um, Hekki . . ."

"Hekika Genkun."

"Right, right. Also known as Hekika Genkun Gyokuyou-sama. In the middle of Mount Hou is Mount Ka, where the number one goddess lives. Seioubo, the Queen Mother of the West."

"Very good."

"Tentei lives on Mount Suu. He's the Lord God Creator. He watches over everything and everybody in the world." The boy looked high into the sky. The Zui-un left a long trail as it headed to the east. He added, "The empress rules the kingdom. If the bad empress is gone and a new empress has arrived, does that mean we can go home?"

I hope so, Rangyoku thought, hugging her brother tightly. Like many of those standing on the paddy causeways, the sign of the Zui-un awakened hope within her heart.

The miserable rule of Jokaku, the Late Empress of Kei, had brought the kingdom to ruin. In her last days, she'd ordered the expulsion of all women. Rangyoku had no choice but to take her brother by the hand and start toward the border. Many families hid their daughters, or dressed them up like boys, or bribed soldiers and government officials. Although her mother did her best to protect her, she died in midwinter during a cold spell that engulfed Ei Province.

The kingdom in chaos, her mother dead, and Rangyoku being driven from Kei, they resolved to flee to another kingdom across the sea. People like them, banished or escaping the kingdom's devastation and ruin, hurried down the

roads. Midway through their journey, Rangyoku observed the flag signaling a new empress flying over the *Rishi*, the city's *riboku* shrine.

The *Ouki*, the imperial standard, depicted a powerful dragon against a black background and the constellation of a rising sun and moon.

Greatly relieved by the promise of peace and prosperity, Rangyoku again took her brother by the hand and set off for their hometown. Except something strange was going on. When a new ruler was chosen, the flag of a flying dragon, called the *Ryuuki*, was flown over the *Rishi*. The *Ouki* was raised when the empress formally ascended to the throne. Rangyoku didn't recall seeing the *Ryuuki*. When she asked around, indeed, the *Ryuuki* hadn't been raised. Furthermore, some *Rishi* were flying the *Ouki* and some were not.

The old-timers were suspicious. If the rightful empress had ascended to the throne, the natural calamities would have ceased. But they had not. To make matters worse, war broke out over whether this was the rightful empress or not. Those living far from the capital had no way of knowing which side would win or even which side *should* win.

Rumors abounded that the empress was a pretender and that the true empress had risen up against her. Then came the raising of the *Ryuuki* and the *Zui-un* stretching to the east. Undoubtedly the true empress had arrived.

Rangyoku watched as the tailing end of the *Zui-un* disappeared to the east. She said, "Hopefully, this empress will bless our lives with good fortune."

All of those gathered on the paddy causeways bowed their heads and uttered the same prayer to the fleeting *Zui-un*.

Gyouten was the capital city of the Kingdom of Kei.

The city spread out in terraces across the high and hilly land. In the western part of the city was the steep and soaring mountain. The mountain's summit pierced the clouds. This mountain, reaching to the Sea of Clouds and beyond, was called Mount *Ryou'un*, also known as Mount Gyouten. At its peak was the Imperial Palace. Kinpa Palace was home to the Imperial Kei, the empress of the Kingdom of Kei.

From high above the Sea of Clouds, Gyouten looked like an island floating in

the midst of an ocean. Perched on the sloping cliffs of the towering, tiered peaks were the many-storied building that comprised Kinpa Palace.

A giant turtle set down at the western edge of Mount Gyouten (or Gyouten Island). This divine beast had borne the empress back from Mount Hou. The turtle's name was Genbu.

The Ministers of the Rikkan lined up along the harbor to greet the new empress. They who lived in the world above knew it was Genbu whose flight left the trail across the Sea of Clouds, called the Zui-un by those who lived in the world below.

Under the watchful eyes of the ministers, Genbu extended his craggy neck to the strand. The new empress stepped onto the shore and greeted Chousai, the prime minister. A soft sigh followed as many of the people there, heads still bowed, sneaked peaks from beneath their brows.

Kei was a kingdom in chaos because the throne had so long been vacant. In particular, these past three generations had seen a succession of short-lived rulers, all of them women. Even the pretender that followed them was a woman. And now, the new empress as well.

Kaitatsu was a word unique to the people of Kei. A long time ago, an emperor ruled Kei for over three hundred years. His name was Emperor Tatsu. *Kaitatsu* meant a nostalgia (*kai*) for Emperor Tatsu. Toward the end of his reign, Emperor Tatsu inflicted all manner of hardships on his people. But for three hundred years they'd been governed peacefully and wisely. *Kaitatsu* reflected that longing for the enlightened rule of a long-lived emperor.

This was the reason for the furtive sigh: *Enough of empresses. It'd be nice to have an emperor again.*

Though always voiced under the breath, those expressing this sentiment were not few in number. The sum of their reactions amounted to a rather public expression of dismay.

Nonetheless, that day the imperial standard was raised over the Rishi of Kei. In the Eastern Kingdom of Kei, a new empress had ascended to the throne.

The Era of the Imperial Kei, the Dynasty of Sekishi (the Red Child), had begun.

Part I

Chapter 4

[1-1] At the center of the world was Mount Hou. The goddess Gyokuyou governed that holy place. Because of the respect and affection held for Gyokuyou, many girls were named after her.

In the northwest quadrant of the world, at the eastern reaches of the Kingdom of Hou, in the province of Kei and the shire of Han, was a girl named Gyokuyou.

“Gyokuyou!”

The cry carried far on the autumn breeze. The girl lifted her head from the field of dry grass. She grimaced as she straightened her aching back, and she grimaced because she didn’t like the sound of the name.

She’d once had a beautiful name: *Shoukei*. Not some worn out, dime-a-dozen name like Gyokuyou.

Almost three years ago, stained with the blood of her mother and father, she’d been removed from the Imperial Palace and sent to the village of Shindou. Her once pearl-like skin was browned and freckled by the sun. Her chubby, peach-like cheeks had wasted away. The bones stood out in her fingers as did the sinews in her legs. The sun had bleached her dark blue hair an ashen gray. Even her violet eyes lost their brilliance, turning a muddy purple.

“Gyokuyou! Where are you! Answer me!”

Hearing the shrill voice, Shoukei stood up. “I’m over here.” She parted the stalks of maiden grass with her hands, showing herself.

She knew who that irritating voice belonged to in the moment she saw her face. It was Gobo.

“How long is it going to take you harvesting the maiden grass? The other children are already headed back.”

“I’m finishing up just now.”

Gobo pushed her way through the tall grass, took a look at the bundles of stalks Shoukei had gathered, and snorted. "Six bales, indeed. Pretty meager ones at that."

"But . . ."

Gobo jumped down her throat as soon as the first word came out of her mouth. "No back talk from you. Who do you think you are?" She lowered her voice. "This isn't the palace, you know. You're a lowly orphan and don't you forget it."

Shoukei bit her lip. No, she couldn't forget it for an instant. Gobo wouldn't let a day go by without casting an aspersion or two or three. She couldn't forget it if she wanted to.

"How about you put in an honest day's work for once? I shouldn't need to remind you that if I let the cat out of the bag, the people of this village would have your head on a platter."

Shoukei held her tongue. Any reply would be met at once with the retort of that grating voice. "Okay," she said meekly.

"What's that?"

"Thank you for all you've done for me."

A sneer came to Gobo's lips. "Another six bales. Work till dinnertime if you have to. If you're late, you go hungry."

"Yes."

The autumn sun was already low in the sky. Of course it would be impossible to gather six more bales of maiden grass before suppertime.

Gobo sniffed to herself and left, plowing back through the grass. Glancing briefly at Gobo's back, Shoukei grasped the handle of the sickle at her feet. Her hands were liberally nicked and scratched by the maiden grass, her fingers caked with mud. Shoukei had been brought to Kei Province and placed on the census of this remote mountain village. The story was that her parents had died and she'd been sent to local *rike*, a foster home for orphans and the aged from several of the surrounding towns. Gobo was the headmistress of the facility.

Besides Gobo, there were nine children and one old man. At first, Gobo and the others had been nice to her. But children got to talking about how their parents died. Much bitterness was directed against the dead emperor. Shoukei could only hang her head and hold her tongue. When she was asked about her parents, she couldn't think of a good way to answer.

Having been born to wealth and power, she knew nothing of rural life. She had no servants. She'd been thrown into an environment she had never seen before, where she had to till the earth by the sweat of her brow and sew her own clothes with her own hands. She hardly knew her left hand from her right. Having lived such a cocooned life, it was hard getting used to the life of the orphanage. She ended up estranged from the others. She was so dumb, they said, she didn't even know how to use a hoe. She couldn't explain that she had never seen a hoe before. She'd never touched a hoe before.

According to her current census records, Shoukei's "parents" had lived alone in a mountain forest not far from Shindou. They were itinerants who'd quit their homesteads and were not attached to any township. Itinerants were often gamblers, criminals, or recluses like her "parents." They had discreetly eked out a living in the mountains near Shindou as charcoal makers, drifters with no ties to the land or any landowner.

They'd been executed.

Shoukei's real father, the Imperial Hou Chuatatsu, had promulgated countless laws and edicts ordering the itinerants to return to their lands of record. To reject their obligations to the law was to reject the sanctuary of the law. Crime and corruption festered amongst the itinerants. Their undisciplined lives undermined the upright citizenry and encouraged the criminal element. The emperor implored them again and again to return to their homesteads and resume their proper livelihoods. Those who did not could not expect to escape punishment.

Gekkei—the man who'd inflicted this plight on her—registered Shoukei on the census as the daughter of this couple. Their child, previously in the care of an orphanage in a faraway village, was supposedly transferred here just before their deaths.

But Gobo had seen through the fabrication. The girl entrusted to her orphanage was none other than Chuutatsu's supposedly dead daughter. One day she had said to Shoukei, "If this is indeed the case, then you must let me know all about it. This life must be so very difficult for you."

Shoukei wept. A life spent growing food and raising animals was indeed a trying one.

"Just supposing that the princess herself was living way out here in the sticks, dressed in rags. She who was once known as the brightest gem in Hoso. The jewel in the crown."

Shoukei buried her face in her hands and Gobo continued on in her soothing, coaxing voice. "An acquaintance of mine happens to be a wealthy merchant in the capital of Kei Province. He deeply mourns the passing of our late emperor."

Shoukei was unable to hold back any longer. Her life could never be as it was before, but the promise of things improving even just a little, of being rescued from this grubby existence, enticed to her let down her guard.

"Oh, Gobo, please help me." She collapsed in tears. "Gekkei, the marquis of Kei, he murdered my mother and father and abandoned me to this fate. He hates me."

"Just as I thought." Ice and steel stole into her voice. Shoukei raised her head in surprise. Gobo said, "You are that monster's daughter."

Shoukei could hear Gobo clenching her teeth and realized her mistake.

"He killed people like they were insects."

It was because people broke the laws, Shoukei wanted to retort, but too intimidated to speak, she swallowed her words.

"He killed my son. All because he felt sorry for a child going to the block and threw a stone at the executioner. For that alone, he was condemned and sentenced to death by that jackal."

"But . . . that was . . ."

"So you think he should have been executed as well?"

Shoukei shook her head violently. "No, I didn't know anything about it. I didn't

know anything about my father doing things like that.”

In fact, Shoukei was completely in the dark about what her mother and father had done. Sheltered within the heart of the palace, surrounded by wealth and fortune, she’d assumed that the rest of the world was the same way. It wasn’t until the soldiers gathered in the city below the palace and turmoil rent the air that it occurred to her that anyone might hate her father.

“You didn’t know? Do you expect me to believe the princess royal had no idea what was going on inside the Imperial Court? The whole kingdom fills to the brim with angry protests and laments for the dead and you don’t hear a word?”

“I honestly didn’t know.”

“You lived your shameless little life with no idea where the food came from to fill your dirty little mouth? From the people of this village, that’s where from! Who, despite all the burdens laid upon their backs, kept their shoulders to the wheel and put in one honest day’s work after another.”

“I’m telling you, I didn’t know about any of this!”

“To think, all that work to feed the likes of you!”

A sharp prick of pain brought Shoukei back to her senses. She’d nicked her finger on one of the teeth of the sickle. “Ow,” she said. There was pain in her heart as well as her finger. “I really didn’t know what was going on.”

Gobo made no bones about hating her. The other children in the orphanage and the people in the village disliked her as a matter of course. She had to work three times as hard as the other children, she was always the last one done, and everybody called her stupid.

“What did I ever do to them?”

She really hadn’t known. Her father and mother never granted her an audience at the Imperial Court. They never let her leave the palace. There’d been no way for her to find out what kind of place the kingdom was.

It took her three trips to haul the bales of maiden grass. By the time she was finally done, long shadows were falling across the road. Dinnertime at the orphanage was over.

"Where have you been, coming in at this hour?"

The snickers of the other girls at the orphanage fell upon her ears. Gobo looked at her with cold eyes. "Like I said, if you didn't get back in time, there's no dinner for you."

Shoukei bit her lip. Three years had passed since coming to live here. She'd learned to endure her impoverished circumstances, her humble attire. But one thing she'd never do was beg for a bite to eat.

"That's the way it goes for silly slowpokes like Gyokuyou."

"Everybody knows what a freeloader she is."

The slanders ringing in her ears, Shoukei dragged herself out of the dining hall.

The courtyard was bathed in the light of the harvest moon. The children were divided up among the rooms on either side of the courtyard, girls on one side, boys on the other. Shoukei lived with the rest of the girls in the rooms on the right side of the courtyard. This short period of time before the others returned to their rooms constituted one of the few moments of respite she had to herself.

Shoukei looked at the row of crude beds, the small tables and creaky chairs, and closed her eyes.

It's all like a dream.

At the palace, she had the run of a building in one of the wings, albeit a small one. A big, luxurious bed. Many, many rooms. A garden bathed in sunlight where flowers bloomed and birds sang. Ladies-in-waiting, musicians and dancers at her disposal. Silk dresses and jewelry. Her playmates were the bright and graceful daughters of lords and ministers.

She slipped under the thin futon. The futon was damp and cool. The cold season was coming to the northern part of the country.

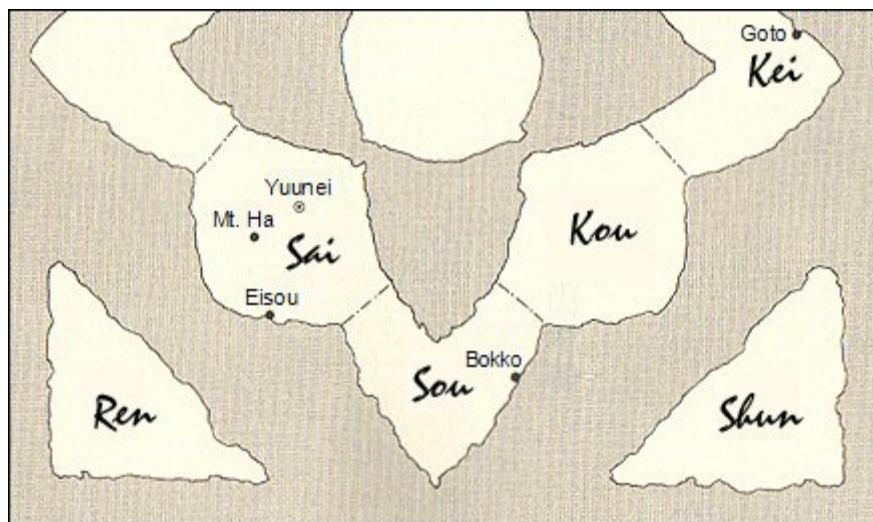
Her parents had been slaughtered, their heads separated from their bodies. That butcher Gekkei had done it. Rather than consign her to this miserable existence, why hadn't he killed her as well? Because he wanted her to live in torment.

Shoukei closed her eyes.

It'd be fine with her if she never woke up again.

Chapter 5

[1-2] In the southwest quadrant of the world was the Kingdom of Sai. In the province of Ho, in the county of Jin, there was a mountain that reached beyond the clouds. It was one of the Ryou'un mountains, called Mount Ha.



Those Ryou'un mountains that didn't house the palaces of the emperor or the province lords were deemed the property of the emperor. They were often used for the imperial gardens or the imperial villa or the imperial mausoleum.

As for Mount Ha, it'd been presented to a woman by an emperor who'd ruled many generations before, the Late Emperor Fuou. The woman built a manor on the side of the mountain near the summit. It was known as *Suibidou*, the Cave of Delicate Green.

The Late Emperor Fuou had also invested the woman as a wizard. Because she lived on Suibi Peak on Mount Ha, she was known as Lady Suibi. Her given name was Riyou. She had once been the favorite mistress of Emperor Fuou.

At daybreak Riyou stood in the entranceway to the manor. Her servants notwithstanding, her life was a lonely one. She sought out human companionship in the cities near the mountain. But practically immortal, never aging, there were few people she could really bond with. She could count on the fingers of one hand the people she really knew, and all of them were wizards, too.

She was setting off from the manor to visit one of them.

Suib Peak looked down at the distant world below. No human being could scale the bottomless cliffs to the entrance of the manor. Riyou took up the reins of her flying tiger. The tiger's name was Setsuko, another present from the Late Emperor Fuou. With her flying tiger, she could come and go from her front doorstep. Though she could also descend the mountain through tunnels by foot or on horseback, the idea of sneaking out through secret passageways was an affront to her dignity.

"Please come back soon."

Her servants lined up at the entranceway to the manor to see her off. They knelt on the ground and bowed low together, their breath puffing pale white in the clear fall air. Looking over the scene, Riyou narrowed her eyes slightly. There were twelve of them altogether.

"You're always in awfully good spirits whenever I go anywhere." A sardonic smile came to her lips. "Must you be so happy to see me go? Well, I suppose this bothersome old cat being away gives the mice more room to play."

Riyou chuckled to herself. Her servants didn't answer, hunched over like birds huddled against a winter wind. Riyou's eyes fell on a girl. Aside from her being the youngest of the servants, there was nothing exceptional about her. Her name was Mokurin, though Riyou never addressed her by that name.

"If you don't wish me to return, well, why not be honest about it? Wouldn't you say, Honma?"

Jackass, the nickname meant. Riyou addressed her with a sneer on her ruby red lips. The girl hesitantly raised her eyes, eyes that seemed overly large on her thin face. Riyou's smile reflected in those large eyes. "You really don't want me to come back, do you?"

The girl shook her head as if offended by the very thought. "All of us humbly await your return. Please . . . please take care."

"Well, with or without your blessing, I should be back within a fortnight. Are you saying you'd like me to return sooner?"

The girl glanced around, as if confused by the question. "Yes," she said, casting a frightened look up at Riyou's face.

Riyou laughed out loud. “But of course. That being the case, I’ll hurry back as quickly as possible. I’m sure you’ll want to do all you can to make my homecoming a pleasant one.”

“Yes. Of course.”

With that, Riyou turned to the rest of the servants. “Then why not brew me some *gyokkou* stones? Oh, and let’s make things tidy around here, shall we? And tend to the gardens.”

The girl blanched. *Gyokkou* were stones created on the Five Sacred Mountains at the center of the world. These stones contained magical powers that when brewed created a kind of mystic wine. These were not stones she could simply pick up and carry home with her.

“What’s this? Won’t you be waiting to greet me with open arms? How about some roasted proverb fish and simmered jewel grass? There should be a scrap or two around here somewhere. Though I’m not aware of a single wilted leaf left in the garden.”

Riyou smirked, knowing full well the absurdity of her demands. “While you’re at it, apply a coat of paint to the walls and pillars. Nothing pleases me more than a freshly-painted home. And only because Honma was thoughtful enough to ask.”

The girl looked nervously around at the others. None of them raised their heads.

Gazing down at them, Riyou adjusted her ermine coat and picked up the reins. “Well, don’t you work too hard, now. I am a forgiving taskmaster. I’m not going to scold anybody for letting their hair down a little. While I’m out, I leave everything in your capable hands.”

“As you wish.” The servants scraped their foreheads against the ground, as did the girl, who looked about ready to cry.

Riyou climbed onto Setsuko. With a shout of laughter, the flying tiger leapt from the entranceway and down into the wintry desolation of the world below.

The servants raised their heads and watched Setsuko sail out of sight to the north. As one, they looked over their shoulders at the girl.

"You had to go and open your big mouth!"

"Don't you know when to put a cork in it?"

"A laundry list of impossibilities! Honma sowed this mess and now she can reap it!"

"How about we send the little witch to the Five Mountains? By the time she returns, Lady Suibi will have been back for ages."

There was rank among wizards as well. Riyou herself was a class-three wizard. In order to qualify as one of Lady Suibi servants, she had to have barely enough talent to be listed upon the Registry of Wizards. But nothing more than that. The girl called Honma was the lowest-ranked of the lesser wizards.

"What a fine mess. In the middle of this freezing cold, we're supposed to go to Mount Go and dig up gyokkou stones? And then to the Kyokai to catch proverb fish? And on top of that, jewel grass? At this time of year, with winter coming on, tell me, where's anybody going to lay their eyes on jewel grass?"

"Damn it all, with her finally leaving town for a few days, I was counting on taking things easy for a change."

"Honma can do the cleaning and painting. That's all she's good for, anyway."

Their censorious eyes fell upon the girl. She fled.

She ran into the garden, to the trunk of an old pine tree in a corner of the garden nestled up against the cliff. There she wept.

When Riyou spoke to her in that manner, how else was she supposed to respond? If it had been any of the other servants, they would have said the same thing. It wasn't her fault. In the first place. Riyou had no intent of letting her servants slack off during her absence. This was always the way she did things. Everybody in the manor should know that by now.

"What's this now?" came a voice behind her. It was the old man who kept guard over the garden. "Oh, don't let it get to you. They're taking it out on you because they don't have the guts to stand up to her either. It'll be okay once they get it out of their systems, Mokurin."

The girl shook her head. "That's not my name."

Back in that world she so dearly longed for, she was called Suzu. An itinerant monk taught her the three Chinese characters that made up her Japanese name: Ooki Suzu.

People here, though, combined the second and third characters. Because in Chinese *ki* (or wood) was pronounced *moku*, and *suzu* (or bell) was pronounced *rin*, they called her Mokurin. At least when they weren't using some insulting term like Honma, among others. None was her real name.

Her old home on a gently sloping hill amidst the rolling mountains—the moments of warm conversation—she'd lost it all. A hundred years had passed since she'd been swept away to this world. The slave trader had taken her away, and while crossing the mountain pass she'd fallen from a precipice and ended up in the Kyokai.

"Why does she have to be like that?"

"Because that's the kind of person she is. Don't let her get to you. After all, being so headstrong was what got her sent packing in the first place. Giving her this manor was the tactful way of easing her out."

"I know that, but . . ."

Suzu had been suddenly thrust into this strange world, not able to communicate and not having the slightest idea what was going on. And she was only fourteen years old.

From the small seaside village, she'd been sent to a bigger town. She was trundled here and packed off there for days, not knowing what was going to happen next. Finally she was taken to a big city and was handed over to a troupe of traveling entertainers.

She'd spent a little over three years with the troupe. To Suzu, a solid blur of incomprehension. They visited cities hither and yon, high and low, and met many people. All she figured out was that she'd somehow gotten separated from the land of her birth and was now a great distance from it. There were mountains that pierced the heavens, cities surrounded by high walls, strange manners and customs, and a strange language.

Everything was far beyond her grasp and forever would be. That was the

conclusion she was forced to come to.

With each new city, Suzu harbored fresh hopes that, by some happy accident, she would run into a person who understood her and could send word back to her village. Every expectation was dashed. About the time she began to abandon hope that such a person existed, they arrived in Jin County. There she met Riyou.

In four years she hadn't learned a single one of the troupe's performances. She was consigned to cleaning duties precisely because she didn't understand what anybody was saying.

No matter where they went, she didn't recognize the language people spoke. No matter how many times people talked to her and she talked to other people, nothing made sense. Nobody knew the way home. She had no idea what to do. Every day ended with her in tears.

People would just laugh at her when she said she didn't understand what they were saying. Eventually, Suzu stopped talking all together. It was too intimidating to speak or be spoken to.

So it was hardly unreasonable that she should be delighted beyond belief when, in a city in Jin County, she met Riyou. It wasn't long before Riyou was deriding her at every turn. But Suzu relished at least being insulted with words she understood.

Riyou could communicate with her because she was a wizard. Learning that everybody would understand her and she would understand them too, Suzu begged to be made a wizard. She'd happily become a servant, work as hard as she had to. And so, answering her pleas, Riyou invested her as a wizard.

For a century, she had been all but a prisoner in this place.

She'd thought of running away any number of times. Yet if she left the manor without Riyou's permission, Riyou would have her name erased from the Registry of Wizards. And if that happened, she'd be plunged right back into that incomprehensible world of misfortune.

"Well," said the old man, patting Suzu on the shoulder. "You'd better get back to work. No rest for the weary."

Suzu nodded, clenching her cold fingers together. *Somebody*, she repeated to

herself. *Somebody please save me.*

Chapter 6

[1-3] The heavens were pale blue, the color of winter. Beneath the low-lying skies, a noisy commotion poured out from the city and snaked up the side of the mountain. The tumultuous echoes rebounded from the towering *Ryou-un*, almost loud enough to shake the city to dust.

The name of the city was Gyouten. The faces of the people walking its streets were bright and cheerful. Neither the scattered rubble from the wrecked facades nor the poverty apparent in the dress of the city's occupants weighed heavily on anybody's mind. The reason why could be readily understood from the waving banners everywhere you looked.

The design of the banner was that of a yellow branch against a black background. From the branch hung three fruits, peaches according to custom. A snake was coiled around the branch. This was the legendary branch given to each of the kings by the Lord God of the Heavens at the Creation of the World.

Draped from every nook and cranny of every building, the banners ascended the slopes, as if showing people along the way to the auspicious events taking place at the Imperial Palace.

The entranceway to every home was decorated with flowers. Paper lanterns hung from the eaves. From the eaves, the eye was drawn upwards to the soaring blue-tiled roof of the Highland Gate at the entranceway to the compound that housed the Hall of Government.

A new empress had been enthroned.

The *Ouki*, the imperial standard indicating the accession of a new empress, had flown for two months. At last came the announcement of the coronation. The sight of the banners, signaling the arrival of the great day, was cause for much rejoicing.

Crowds of people streamed down the wide boulevards to the Highland Gate. Inside the gate, between the Hall of Government and the Imperial Shrine (used primarily for ceremonial functions) was a wide plaza. The plaza was already jam-

packed. Within the neat lines of black-armored Palace Guards and black-robed ministers of state, and the row upon row of fluttering flags, a figure in black appeared on the rostrum of the shrine. The plaza erupted in cheering.

The imperial ceremonial dress was called the *Daikyuu*. It was comprised of a black robe, a black *kanmuri* or diadem, a pale red skirt, cinnabar apron and red slippers. And as if purposely made to match on purpose was Youko's red hair.

"She actually became Empress," Rakushun muttered to himself, recognizing the person standing in the middle of the luxurious room.

Her presence evoked exclamations of admiration from the mismatched pair ahead of him, one tall man, one short. The *Daikyuu* was the most formal of the empress's outfits. Its twelve ornamental insignia identified her supreme rank. Because she was a woman, her *kanmuri* was smaller. Instead, her hair was beautifully ornamented. The dragon embroidered on her robes was similarly elegant.

The ceremony enthroning the new empress had just finished. She looked over her shoulder and spotted Rakushun as he entered the room. A warm smile came to her face.

"Rakushun," she said. She noticed the two men next to him and acknowledged them with a polite bow. "Thank you so much for coming all this way."

"Enough with the etiquette," the shorter of the two said with a wave of his hand. "You look great, Youko. I'm sure the spectators saw what they came to see. Your subjects will be disappointed if you don't put yourself on display now and then. Besides, letting the general public know they've got a babe for a monarch could come in handy."

Enki had an indecorous tongue and a nonchalant disposition. Youko grinned. She motioned for her guests to sit. They were the Imperial En and Enki, the emperor and Taiho of the Kingdom of En to the north of Kei. The emperor's name was Shouryuu and Enki's name was Rokuta. En was the only country with which Kei currently had diplomatic relations.

"It's been a while, indeed. I really am grateful for all your help." She bowed to the gray-haired rat standing next to them. "I must thank you as well, Rakushun. I certainly couldn't have made it to this point without you."

"Oh, it was nothing." Rakushun said with a shake of his tail. "I'm a mere hanjuu. The empress shouldn't bow to the likes of me. You're making me self-conscious."

Youko laughed.

She'd come from across the sea, from the land of Yamato, the place she called Japan. Youko was born in Japan and had suddenly found herself thrust into this world, a world she knew nothing about. With the help of these three, she'd rightfully claimed the throne. A pretender by the name of Joei had raised an army and sought the kingdom for herself. With the Imperial En and Enki at her side, Youko suppressed the rebellion. She of course appreciated all that they had done. But her depth of gratitude toward Rakushun was much more profound. Relentlessly pursued by the pretender's minions, Rakushun had rescued her as she lay on the verge of death.

"I am indeed grateful to you," she said.

Rakushun's tail fluttered back and forth. Rokuta couldn't resist chortling at his discomfiture. "A rare thing for an empress in this get-up to bow her head to anybody."

"Oh, give it a rest," said Rakushun. Being a hanjuu meant that Rakushun was half-human, half-beast. In his case, the latter half was a rat. When in rat form, he was about as tall as a human child so he had to look up at her. "I'm just saying she doesn't have to thank *me*. It's because of Youko that I was able to attend university in En and that I got to know the Imperial En. I'm the one who should be saying thanks."

"That's not something *I* can take credit for."

Rokuta laughed again. "Come to think about it, Rakushun has done quite well for himself. He can count an emperor *and* an empress personal friends. If his chums at college ever found out, they'd have a fit."

"Point made, Taiho."

Shouryuu said, a smile in his voice, "But weren't you dragging your heels a bit, Youko? Joei's rebellion has been over for two months, already."

Youko smiled wryly. "To tell the truth, I wanted to put it off even longer. The

province lords insisted I get it done with by the winter solstice.”

It was the empress who calmed the heavens and the earth, who propitiated the gods. Of the rites and rituals, the most important was the Festival of the Winter Solstice. The empress’s role during the winter festival was to travel to the southern district of the city and there make offerings to Heaven and pray for the protection of the kingdom. This ceremony was called the *Koushi*.

“Why put it off?”

Youko sighed. “Because I haven’t yet decided on the Inaugural Rescript.”

The Inaugural Rescript was the first proclamation of a new ruler. All laws were promulgated in the name of the empress. However, a law was not even submitted for the empress’s approval until proposals from the bureaucracy had been considered, the affected ministries had been consulted, and the consent of the Minister of the Left, the Minister of the Right, and the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal had been acknowledged.

It was not intended that the emperor write the laws and run the kingdom by herself. The ministers were appointed for this purpose. Laws promulgated upon the empress’s own initiative were known as Imperial Rescripts.

“What did the Imperial En decree?” Youko asked.

“I came up with what is called the rule of one-in-four.”

“And that is?”

“For every four *ares* (400 square meters) cultivated, a homesteader is given one *are* (100 square meters) of land for every four *ares* (400 square meters) put under cultivation. This was due to the shortage of arable land.”

Youko said with some chagrin, “The ministers want to make the imperial color red. They say red because the Late Empress Yo had chosen green.”

Rokuta nodded. “I agree.”

“You think so?”

“Wood creates Fire. Red follows green. After all, the Late Empress Yo abdicated so that a better reign might follow.”

"There are so many customs I don't understand."

"Don't be impatient. It'll become second nature to you before long."

Youko managed a smile and nodded. "But this all seems beside the point. From what I've heard, the Inaugural Rescript is supposed to clearly lay out what kind of place I intend to make of this kingdom."

"And yet you can't even agree on which color is best."

Yeah, Youko said, hanging her head. A self-deprecating smile came to her lips. "I still don't know what it means to rule a country. I want to make a great kingdom. But what kind of a kingdom is a great kingdom anyway?"

"Hard to say."

"I want my kingdom to be wealthy. I don't want the people of Kei to go hungry. I suppose that if Kei were wealthy, then people wouldn't go hungry. I was born in a wealthy country. But as to whether that made it a *great* country, I don't know. All that wealth can distort a lot of things."

The thought went through her mind: *Why couldn't I have been more interested in political science and stuff like that? I never even understood how the Japanese government worked.*

She said, "I've been entrusted with the weight of a whole country and I can't begin to know how best to balance that burden. How useful can such an empress be?"

Shouryuu said, "Youko, governing a kingdom is not easy."

"No, it's not."

"But you must never let the people see the nature of your struggles."

"I suppose."

"You will have many worries, many troubles, many difficulties. But from the point of view of the people, if you can't be satisfied with your own life, then what value can their own lives have in comparison?"

"You're probably right."

"You have nothing whatsoever to gain by displaying a troubled countenance."

No matter how confused you might be, show a confident face to the world. The people will prefer that as well.”

“But . . .”

“Do you think your subjects can have faith in a hesitant, apprehensive ruler? Will they entrust their lives to an empress who finds governing them a constant annoyance?”

“Not at all.”

“When you don’t know what to do next, first take a good long look at yourself. Don’t rush into anything. Life is *not* short for you.”

“But,” said Rokuta, sticking his head into the conversation. “I say, to each her own. If you really got as laid back as Shouryuu, now, that would be a problem.”

“Rokuta,” Shouryuu said with a scowl.

Rokuta ignored him. “Better to have doubts about the Inaugural Rescript than to have none. Who’s going to trust an emperor who tosses off rescripts without a second thought? The fewer the better. Usually, you get a lot of rescripts at the beginning of a dynasty, when pacifying a country in chaos, and at the end of a dynasty, when a peaceful kingdom is being brought to its knees.”

“That makes sense.”

“On the other hand, Shouryuu here is a positive rescript fiend. You have absolutely no obligation to follow his lead whatsoever in *that* regard.”

Youko had to try hard not to laugh. “I’ll remember that.”

“How about you trying taking it easy for a while? The affairs of the kingdom have calmed down a bit, haven’t they?”

“For the time being,” said Youko.

“Then don’t sweat it. When it comes to stuff like what direction you want to take the country, it’s really not so complicated. Just ask yourself what kind of life you would want to live, and then what kind of kingdom would best bring that about. Don’t rush it. Think it all the way through.”

“But there’s still that Inaugural Rescript . . .”

Rokuta laughed. “Oh *that*. In the end, some emperors don’t even bother. Others simply wish their subjects to take care of themselves and stay healthy.”

Youko burst out laughing. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“That was the substance of the Imperial Ren’s Inaugural Rescript just the other day.”

“Unbelievable.”

The Kei Taiho walked into the room. He was also wearing ceremonial dress. Youko turned and smiled at him. “Hey, Keiki. Look, the Imperial En dropped by for a visit.”

Part II

Chapter 7

[2-1] Welcoming guests of honor kept Kinpa Palace in a constant buzz of activity. Ministers and lowly bureaucrats scurried about tending to the guests and making preparations for the upcoming Festival of the Winter Solstice a month hence. The ladies of the court responsible for the imperial wardrobe were likewise busily occupied.

Youko couldn't help rolling her eyes.

"And how does Her Highness wish her hair done today?"

The question was posed by the coterie who tended to her personal appearance. "Oh, just tie it back," she answered.

Her ladies-in-waiting frowned in unison. "Your Highness, you can't greet your guests looking like that!"

"Indeed. If Her Highness has no particular preference in mind, she should leave it to us."

When they weren't chattering at her in this scolding manner, they went right on arranging her wardrobe pretty much as if she wasn't there.

"How would that emerald tiara look?"

"Would it go with the red hairpin?"

"Look, the comb is red as well. Pearl would be better than ruby."

"Well, then let's made the *obidama* pearl as well."

Youko groaned to herself. She didn't dislike getting dolled up like this, but wearing her hair up and having it festooned with jewelry and doodads made her feel top-heavy. Even when the whole shebang didn't feel like it was about to topple over, the long hems of her robes gave her the mobility of a turtle. It drove her crazy.

"Go ahead and tie it back. And I'll be fine with the jacket."

They all glared at her. "Oh, you cannot be serious!"

Youko surrendered with another groan. In any case, for someone like her, raised in what was to them a foreign country, these were definitely not clothes made for walking. Her life before her coronation had approximated that of a vagabond. At the time, the best she could hope for was a tunic and short *hakama* made of coarse fabric. Pretty much bargain-basement fashion. Having gotten accustomed to *that*, she couldn't get used to these outfits that dragged the hems of her robes along the ground behind her.

Even a Japanese long-sleeved kimono wasn't this bad.

She sighed.

In basic terms, men's clothing was based on the *houkin*, women's on the *jukun*. The *houkin* consisted of a light kimono (*kin*) worn under a jacket or tunic (*hou*). A man never went out wearing only the *kin*, always the *hou* over it. The *jukun* was a more traditional dress, something like a blouse and wraparound skirt. The *ju* was the blouse and the *kun* was the skirt. But a woman wasn't considered presentable wearing only the blouse and skirt. She'd ever leave the house without donning an outer garment, such as a vest or robe.

All clothing came in a variety of styles with different names. In a nutshell, the wealthier the person, the longer the hem and sleeve and the more generous the fit. The fabric was always of the highest grade. The clothing wore by the poor was shorter in length and tighter in fit simply in order to economize. Having grown up in a much different environment, Youko was disturbed to discover that she could tell at a glance a person's economic status.

A class system was very much at work here. The presence (or absence) of a particular status symbol made all the difference in lifestyle. Government ministers and administrators set themselves apart with long, wide-sleeved tunics the commoners called long coats (*chouhou*). They referred to their own garb simply as *hou* (togs), while the elite termed them *houshi* (tad togs). Thus were the distances between the classes clearly demarcated.

The clothing Youko wore signified the authority of her office. Her hems must be long, her robes exceedingly so, such that they dragged on the floor. Her

sleeves as well must be both wide and long. On top of everything else was layer upon layer of kimono. The layers also indicated her status. That alone made for an unbearable mass, not to mention the cloth talisman she had to hold on to, the obidama and necklaces and other baubles, and in her hair, a mountain of combs and hairpins pressing down on her head.

If that wasn't enough, they tried to get her to pierce her ears so she could wear earrings. She lied and said that back in Japan, a woman getting her ears pierced was the custom of criminals. They bought it.

"Simple is better," she stated. "After all, the Imperial En is one of our guests."

Her lady's maid scowled. "*Precisely* because the Imperial En is present, you should not want to be seen so. You don't want to look all dowdy compared to the monarch of such a splendid kingdom, now, would you?"

"And besides, the Imperial En is a warrior emperor."

A pained smile came to Youko's lips. "I find it hard to get excited about this frilly getup. I'm afraid it's so over the top it's going to put him off."

At least, that's the opinion I'll be sure to leave him with.

Her ladies-in-waiting were still trying to find a comb that went with her hair. This statement left them looking so despondent that Youko had to laugh. "Look," she said, "I'm not talking about putting on togs but couldn't we pare things down a bit?"

When she told Shouryuu about it later, he roared with laughter. "It's a hard life, isn't it, Youko?"

"I prefer Gen'ei Palace. They get it."

After becoming emperor, even a man wasn't supposed to run around in togs. Still, for the most part, Shouryuu's appearance was plainer than the average minister of Kei.

Rokuta leaned against the railing of the gazebo and scowled. "Oh, live with it," he said. "He's been fighting it for three hundred years. What you're seeing now are the hard-won fruits of compromise."

"Fighting it . . . oh, I see. The fashion police." Youko grinned.

"It's nice in Yamato. What they call western dress? The kind of clothes that are easy to move around in."

"You certainly seem to know it well. You go to Japan a lot?"

"Now and then," Rokuta said with a knowing smile. "One of the few perks of being a kirin. Once a year or so I take a little trip." He folded his arms across his chest. "That said, there's no way I'm going shopping for *you* or becoming your tailor. What I prefer is no better than beggar's rags, I'm telling you."

"Well, I really don't need anything like that from over there." She glanced at Rokuta. "But exactly how do you go shopping for clothes? The money is completely different."

"Oh, there are ways," Rokuta said with a laugh.

Youko gave him a surprised look. "I thought kirin were supposed to act only with the purest of intentions at heart."

"Let's not go there." Rokuta jumped down into the garden. "Hey, Rakushun, what's up?"

Rakushun was standing at the edge of a lake not far from the portico looking out at the water. Rokuta ran over to him.

They were in Hari Palace, located to the south of Kinpa Palace. Hari Palace was a greenhouse build by an emperor many generations before. The walls and transoms were made of glass, as was the steeply roof, supported by a row of white stone pillars. Light streamed down on the garden. In the midst of the grove, the clear, brimming water of a lake spilled off into a marshy stream. The lake was stocked with fish. Brightly-feathered birds flew about. The portico enclosed a large garden. Several small gazebos were set amidst the blossoming flowers.

Shouryuu said, "Nice place to take a nap."

Youko smiled. "When do you ever have time to take a nap?"

"Oh, the bureaucrats do most of the heavy lifting in En these days. There's not much left for me to do."

"But of course."

He lowered his voice and said, “It’s tough going until you can find the kind of people you can trust the government with.” Youko looked at him and he smiled bitterly. “The early days of a dynasty are not about thought and reason. For the time being, your kirin won’t be of much use. The real question is how long it will take you to gather a band of trusted and loyal retainers.”

“Yeah.”

“And what became of the marquis of Baku?”

Youko shook her head with an exclamation of exasperation. The man’s name was Koukan. Koukan had been the province lord of Baku, on the western coast of Kei facing the Blue Sea. When Kei fell into chaos under the rule of the pretender, Baku continued to resist.

When Youko asked for Shouryuu’s assistance in overthrowing the pretender, the first thing he encouraged her to do was contact Koukan and obtain the support of the provincial guard of Baku. But the marquis was captured by the pretender’s forces before this communiqué could be delivered.

“It seems that the marquis of Baku had designs on the throne as well.”

“Really?”

With Youko’s arrival, those not actually residing at the palace had difficulty deciding whether she was the true emperor or not. Many of the province lords far from the capital flocked to the pretender’s side. Koukan did not. He’d carried on the fight.

The government functionaries wondered what in the world was he up to. Far more than the province lords who’d sided with the pretender, they focused their criticism on Koukan.

Some said Koukan dared seek the throne for himself. That’s why he refused to bow to the pretender. Others rose to his defense. And so the Imperial Court was split in two. In the end, the weight of evidence tipped the scales in favor of his critics. Koukan was relieved on his authority, taken into custody, and was now awaiting sentencing.

Shouryuu listened to Youko explanation and shook his head. “So that’s what it’s come to.”

"The court officials are sticking to their guns. Keiki has repudiated their handling of the case. And so everything is up in the air. The word is they'll give him a sinecure and put him out to pasture and sweep the whole affair under the rug."

"You speak of it like it was somebody's else's problem."

Youko managed a thin smile and didn't answer.

Shouryuu said, "Getting a handle on the Imperial Court is always a challenge for a new ruler. But you've got to know when to take it easy, too. Ride everybody hard all the time and your fair-weather friends will start thinking up with ways to bite back. Backbiting is always the easy first step."

"So it is."

"If they're the type who will back down when the emperor turns up the heat, then don't make a big deal out of it. In any case, you want to keep things in proportion."

"Was it hard for you starting out?"

"You might say. There's no need try and hurry things along. With an empress on the throne, the natural disasters and calamities will abate. By that alone, you are performing a great service."

"That alone won't do."

"Why do you think emperors are given such long lives? Because what you need to get done is going to take more than fifty years or so. You're not working against a deadline, so pace yourself."

Youko nodded. "But you must have things that weigh on your mind."

"You mean the things that make your head hurt just thinking about? There's no end to them."

"Oh, great."

"If you didn't have any problems, you wouldn't have anything to do. It'd get boring." So said this emperor, who'd ruled his kingdom for five hundred years. With a tone of voice somewhere between sarcasm and self-mockery, he added, "And if it did, I'd probably destroy En just to see what happened next."

Chapter 8

[2-2] “Say, do you think maybe Youko’s getting a little down in the dumps?”

Rokuta took off his shoes and sat down on the shore and splashed around with his feet. The water in the lake was warm. Rakushun sat down next to him.

“It’s hardly surprising that you would come to that conclusion.”

Rakushun glanced over his shoulder at Rokuta. He thought he was the only one it had occurred to.

“Yeah. I have to wonder if Youko and Keiki are getting along.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“You hardly ever see them together.”

“That’s true.” Rokuta rested his chin on his hands. “It could be that Keiki’s just uncomfortable around guys like us. Shouryuu and I being the way we are, you know. We’re not the kind of company that a super-serious guy like Keiki wants to hang with. And then you have to consider that he and Youko got off to a pretty shaky start.”

“You think so?”

“Like I said, a super-serious guy. If Youko was kicked-back like Shouryuu, they’d be at loggerheads already. But Youko’s taking herself pretty seriously. Keiki keeps himself busy as a bee. Not to mention that Youko is Keiki’s second liege.”

“How’s that factor in?”

“It factors in all over the place. I imagine when you’ve served two emperors, you can’t help comparing the two. You invest a lot of yourself in your first emperor. No matter what, the next one’s going to take some getting used to. For example, even if the previous emperor was a bad man and his reign short-lived, the kirin’s going to regret moving on. It’s going to stick with him. No doubt it would have been better had Youko been a boy.”

Rakushun exhaled. “Probably so.”

"Youko can't help but remind him of the Late Empress Yo. On top of that, there's his straight-laced personality, and the man doesn't exactly have a way with words. Makes him hard to read. Not to mention that hardly any time has passed."

Rakushun brought to mind Keiki's brusque, blunt manner, his expressionless face, his limpid, golden hair. Golden hair was particular to kirin, but comparing Rokuta and Keiki, their hair was each golden in its own way. Rokuta's hair was more of a bright yellow, while Keiki's was a colder, translucent color. It almost seemed an extension of his personality.

Rokuta laughed brightly. "One way or another, I'm sure Youko will make it work."

Rakushun nodded. "I'm sure she will."

Youko glanced at Rakushun and Rokuta, sitting there at the water's edge, absorbed in conversation. She said in a low voice, "I still don't get this place."

Shouryuu responded cheerfully, "No, I'm sure you don't. Anyway you look at it, things are different here." He chuckled. "Children growing on trees, now that was a shock."

Youko smiled thinly. The smile faded. "Not knowing all this stuff seems to irritate a lot of people."

"You mean Keiki?"

Youko glanced at him and shook her head. "The ministers and officials, too. Everybody seems taken aback by how totally clueless I am. And who can blame them?"

Every time she said, *I don't get it*, Keiki and the ministers shook their heads and sighed.

"It's because I'm a woman, that's why they're not happy with me." She'd heard the whispers plenty of times already. *This is what you get with an empress.*

"Not quite," said Shouryuu.

Youko looked at him. "No?"

"When I came here, the most perplexing things to me were that woman could become ministers and the strange relationship between parents and children."

"Meaning?"

"In Yamato, women were at the center of the family. They rarely ventured into the outside world. Here, though, a woman will leave her children in the care of the father and go to work. Because the Late Empress Yo expelled all the women from the kingdom, Kei doesn't have many female ministers. But women make up almost half of my staff in En. As you'd expect, men predominate in the military. Even there, a good third of the soldiers are women."

"Really . . ."

"If you think it over, there's nothing unusual about it. The kirin chooses the emperor, and as many of the kirin are female as male. Every generation, the scales may tip one way or the other, but in the long run it balances out to about fifty-fifty. The rulers they chose are about half women and half men. Go through the historical records and do the calculations and you'll see that neither sex is favored in the long run."

"No kidding," said Youko, her eyes growing wide.

"There's nothing wrong with an emperor or kirin being a woman, and there's nothing wrong with a minister being a woman, either. Women here don't give birth. Raising children is not by default the woman's job. So a woman's place is not necessarily in the home. Simply because of raw physical strength, they are not always best suited for the military. But where a light touch is called for, or a comprehension of the intricate workings of business is required, they are unsurpassed. As government administrators they can go far. Secretariats are often staffed by women."

Youko laughed. "Of course."

"That's why I don't think the ministers of Kei are giving you a cold shoulder because you're a woman. At the same time, however, being a women does have something to do with it, Kei having had such bad luck with empresses of late."

She gave him a good long look.

"These last three generations have seen a succession of incompetent

monarchs who just happened all to be empresses. The last emperor Keiki chose was an empress and her reign was singularly short. And then he goes and chooses another empress. So the ministers must be thinking to themselves, *What? Again?*"

"That's what it's about?"

"That's what it really is about. The Imperial Kyou of the northwest kingdom of Kyou has reigned for almost ninety years. And the empress who ruled before her did so for an extraordinarily long time. So if you sprang a male emperor on the people of Kyou, they probably wouldn't be very happy about it. In the final analysis, what matters is the devil they know. Don't worry about it."

Youko sighed and then smiled. "Thanks for straightening me out."

"No problem," Shouryuu replied with a grin. "If there's any way I can help out, let me know and I'll do what I can."

Youko bowed to him. "I am truly grateful for all you've done."

Chapter 9

[2-3] As she had promised, two weeks later Riyou, lord of Suibi Manor, returned to her mountainous fiefdom.

When she arrived at Mt. Ha, she drew alongside the soaring palace on Suibi Peak. In the world below, at the foot of Suibi Peak, she could see the hodgepodge of small blue roofs. Taking the tunnel from Suibi Manor down through the heart of the peak, that is where she would emerge in the world below. The palisades enclosing the buildings stood in neat rows, along with more blue-tiled roofs standing before the gate. It was a shrine dedicated to the wizardess who lived on Suibi Peak.

Astride Setsuko's back, peering down at the tableau beneath her, a crooked smile came to Riyou's lips. All she was doing here was piling on the years, nothing more. And yet these people from the world below were grateful for her presence.

Her worshipers no doubt believed that if something serious happened to them one day, Riyou would come to their rescue. In times past, there had been famous wizards of the air who did lend a hand to those in need. Still, it was awfully ignorant of them to expect that *all* wizards should similarly be overflowing with grace and good works.

"Let's go home."

Setsuko set down before the gate to the manor. Five servants rushed out to greet her. Riyou dismounted and gave them a once-over.

"Any changes in my absence?"

Fine with her if there were. In a place in her heart she chose to ignore, Riyou knew that a long life was a thing she could grow weary of. Add three hundred years on top of that, along with the loneliness that came from being left behind by the world. There was not a mortal being left who still remembered a woman named Riyou.

One of the menservants bowed low and said, "There have been no changes."

"Is that so?"

She scanned the entrance to the manor. Of course she remembered what she had asked of them before she left. The manor had been spiffed up considerably. The various beams and columns sported a fresh coat of red paint, the walls newly-applied white stucco.

"So nobody ran off and played hooky."

Riyou laughed. Leaving the red tiger in the care of a groom, she took herself back to the main house. When she arrived at her room, three girls were already waiting, heads bowed, no doubt given the heads-up by a fleet-footed servant.

"Welcome back."

She nodded curtly and continued to stand there. The three scurried over to her and began to undress her. The room was perfectly in order. The pillars and walls had been repainted. All this could not have been accomplished in a mere fortnight. They had likely only tended to the places Riyou was most likely to notice.

"Honma."

Startled, Suzu raised her head. The girl's fear of her was palpable from the moment she entered the room till she left. Knowing this, Riyou looked down at the kneeling girl straightening up her clothes. She said with pure spite, "I went to see the brand-new Imperial Kei. I'd say she's about your age. An empress, no less."

"*Empress*," Suzu repeated in a small, trembling voice.

"As I said, about your age. Though hardly in the same league. Not very ostentatious. A rather severe young lady."

Suzu nodded. Riyou suppressed a smile as she pulled on her robes. "I ran into her at Kaisen Manor on Mt. Ga. I went to pay my respects after the enthronement. The mistress of Kaisen Manor happens to be the mother of the Imperial Kei from many generations past. The empress is a woman of manners and breeding. In other words, not like you at all."

Riyou sat down, comfortably draped in her house robes. Seeing that Riyou's

attention was focused on Suzu alone, the two other maidservants bowed and wordlessly withdrew.

"Apparently she was born in Yamato."

Suzu's head shot up, her eyes seeming to fill her entire face.

"That's right. Where you came from, that place across the eastern Kyokai. Ironic, isn't it? Two girls born in the same Yamato. One becomes a lowly maidservant, the other the empress of the Eastern Kingdom of Kei. A frugal dresser, to be sure, but royalty nonetheless. Her clothes and even her hairpins were of the highest class." Riyou smirked. "If we turned you upside down and shook you silly, not a single jewel would fall out. But when *she* returns to her palace, it's to mountains of gems, no?"

Suzu again nodded. She did not glower or answer back when Riyou ridiculed her. She only debased herself so as not to provoke Riyou any further. Riyou's teasing of the girl resembled that of a predator playing with its prey.

"Oh, I've heard all kinds of things. The Imperial Kei was also swept into this world. At first, she was at a complete loss. Isn't that rich? But despite not knowing a thing, she set off on her journey and eventually sought the assistance of the Imperial En."

Riyou nudged Suzu's collar with the tips of her crossed feet. "Well, for that matter, there's going to be a world of difference between you and anybody else. Falling in with a bunch of itinerant actors, lacking even the talent to stand up on a stage, relegated to a life of menial servitude. The little nobody who begged and pleaded to become my maid."

She gave the girl another jab with her toes, swaying Suzu's bowed head and shaking free several teardrops.

"Now, now, what's this? Imagining the Imperial Kei as some sort of kindred spirit? How impudent. She'd be furious to be pitied by the likes of you. It'd be like a slap in the face."

Suzu's couldn't hold back her smothered sobs. Riyou raised her eyebrows. Having forced her victim to yield, her interest faded. "You may leave," she said dismissively. "I don't want to look at your wretched face. Get out of my sight."

Suzu ran to the garden, to the twisted old pine tree in the heart of the garden where no one could see her. She clung to the trunk of the tree and wept.

Yamato. Japan. The country she so longed for.

"What happened to you, Mokurin? Did the mistress say something to you?"

The old man hurried over to her. Suzu could only shake her head. Just Riyuu being her normal self. She lived to ride Suzu like that. Did she find Suzu so detestable? She couldn't imagine what it was about her that made her so hateful.

"I don't know what she said but you mustn't take it to heart. Serving the mistress requires a lot of patience."

"I know that."

Even knowing that, it didn't mean being ridiculed by others didn't hurt.

"Then why . . . ?"

Suzu collapsed to the ground in tears. Behind her, the old man sighed. "The Imperial Kei," Suzu gasped between sobs. The Imperial Kei was from Yamato. If she was, then from where? What had become of her home country? "Um . . ." she said, raising her tear-streaked face. When the flustered old man turned around, she asked, "The Imperial Kei, where does she live?"

"She lives in the Kingdom of Kei, of course. In the Imperial Palace."

"Oh."

A girl who'd come from Yamato the same as her. Like her, she'd probably been washed onto the shores of Kei. And she became empress. In this world, with their respective stations in life, their paths should never cross.

I want to meet her. Perhaps even find out what kind of person she was.

Another woman like her should have some sympathy for her plight. She'd understand what it was like to be separated from her homeland, the distress of being swept into this strange land, the pain of understanding nothing, the torment of her situation.

"Do you think the Imperial Kei will ever come to Sai?"

The old man shook his head. “Can’t see why she would. Rulers from one kingdom don’t often visit another. It hardly ever happens.”

“I see.”

I want to meet her, Suzu again whispered inside her heart. How could she make it happen? What were the chances of going to Kei and finding her there? How could she get to Kei? If she asked Riyou, the woman would just laugh at her. If she asked for the time to journey there, without giving a reason why, it was hardly likely that Riyou would ever let her go. Simply imagining Riyou’s abuse and ridicule made Suzu tremble.

I want to see her but have no way to go to see her.

What kind of woman was she? If she was good enough to sit upon the throne, she should be a person with a good heart too, not a cruel witch like Riyou. There were so many things she wanted to ask. More than that, so many things she wanted to plead for.

Come. Suzu looked up at the eastern sky. *Please come, come to Sai. Come to Sai and rescue me.*

Chapter 10

[2-4] The wind blew across the white hill, scattering the fallen snow like a blanket of cherry blossoms.

Shoukei rested her hands from pulling the sledge and stretched her back. In the distance she could see the walls of Shindou. At last she was drawing near to the town. The town itself looked like it was buried in snow. The dusk was falling, Shoukei's breath blossomed white against the hazy darkness filling the landscape. Winters in the northern kingdoms were severe, especially the winters in Hou, where the snowfall was considerable. More than the cold, it was simply getting around that was so difficult. The roads were buried in snow, the cities shut off and isolated.

Everyone was practically holding their breath and waiting for the thaw.

Because nothing could be moved during the winter, the smaller shops had to close their doors. When inventories ran low, only those establishments with horse-drawn sleighs could be depended upon. And if the next sleigh was taking too long, the only other option was to wade through the waist-high snow to the next town.

Which is what Shoukei was doing now.

She drew back her shoulders, took a breath, picked up the rope and draped it over her shoulders. She had to get to town before the gates closed. Get shut out of the town in this weather and she would surely freeze to death.

The grade of the road was indistinguishable from the white, rolling hills of surrounding countryside, making it hard to tell where the road ended and the fields began. The fields were surrounded by rock walls to keep grazing goats, sheep and cows from straying, but these too were buried beneath the snow. Though it was yet before the winter solstice, the snowfall this year had been unusually heavy.

Her shoulders ached from the weight of the tow rope. Her toes were frozen. The hundred pounds of charcoal loaded onto the sled made the going slow. She

could have just as well been hauling a grown man.

How long do I go on living like this?

Numb and exhausted, that was the only thought going through her mind. Several times already she had run off the road and fallen into a drift. Each time she had to carry up the sled and load the charcoal back on. If she didn't make better time the gates were going to close. That was what kept her shivering, trembling legs moving forward. She dragged the sled along, ignoring the pain that cut like a knife into her throat and sides.

They're all enjoying themselves right now.

The only people that traveled from city to city during the winter were peddlers and the Red Banner troubadours. The Red Banner troubadours chronicled the history of the kingdoms in verse and song. They'd come to her town. There was hardly anything fun to do during the winter so the Red Banner troubadours showing up was cause for celebration. Despite this, Shoukei alone was sent out to buy charcoal.

Charcoal was indispensable during the winter so it was kept in good supply. And yet she was told that there might not be enough to last till spring and was sent out to get more. She wasn't even provided with a horse.

She hates me that much.

Shoukei cursed Gobo in her heart. Sending her by herself to a neighboring town to haul back a hundred pounds of charcoal on a sled, Gobo knew for damn sure that one slipup and Shoukei would be dead. And one way or another, she made sure Shoukei understand that she didn't care either.

How much longer do I have to put up with this?

When Shoukei turned twenty, she would get her own partition and could leave the orphanage. The reckoning of those twenty years was according to customs followed since time immemorial, but according to Shoukei's age on the census, she had two more years to go.

Two more years of this life.

Even in two years, there was no guarantee that she'd get her plot of land.

Gekkei, the man who had murdered her father, he wasn't likely to so readily set her free.

She resisted the urge to stop and rest and instead pushed herself on. At last, she struggled up to the gates just before they closed for the night. Inside the town, there remained something of the lively atmosphere. She staggered back to the orphanage and sat down in the snow. She could hear the excited voices of the children inside.

Two more years.

Those two years stretched out like an eternity. The thirty years she had spent at the Imperial Palace seemed short in comparison. She grimaced and got to her feet, unloaded the straw sacks of charcoal and stored them in the barn. And then went into the orphanage.

She opened the back door and stepped into the kitchen. "I'm back."

Gobo flashed her a taunting smile. "You've returned with the charcoal, then? If there's even an ounce missing, you'll have to do it all over again."

"It's all there, all one hundred pounds."

Gobo sniffed incredulously and held out her hand. Shoukei deposited the frozen purse in her palm. Gobo checked the contents and gave Shoukei an icy glare. "There's not much change here, is there?"

"Charcoal is expensive. It's pretty scarce this year."

A summer typhoon had blown down the trees on the nearby mountains, leading to the high cost of charcoal.

"So you say," Gobo muttered to herself. She turned to Shoukei with a cold smile. "If you're lying to me, I'll know soon enough. Until then, we'll have to take your word for it."

Shoukei hung her head. *Like I would stoop to stealing chicken feed like this,* she told herself derisively.

"Well, you'd better get started on your evening chores."

Shoukei only nodded. She didn't have the right to talk back to anybody in authority, so no matter how tired she was, she knew it wouldn't do any good to

complain.

Shoukei went to the barn with the other children to feed the animals, muck out the stables, and milk the cow and goat.

Even while doing their chores, the children chattered cheerfully. "Too bad you couldn't get back earlier," a girl said to Shoukei. "The Red Banner people are gone by now."

Shoukei didn't answer, silently cutting the straw into the feed.

"A good thing it snowed," a boy said earnestly.

Even with a horse-drawn sleigh, the snowy roads were almost impassable. When it snowed, the Red Banner troubadours had to camp out in a town until it stopped. Truth be told, Shoukei had been wishing for snow as well. But the snow was also the reason she hadn't gotten home until late.

The Red Banner troubadours were masters of travel, but even winter bested them at times. They usually traveled the circuit of cities and towns from spring until fall and then wintered over in a big city, where they would rent a small dwelling and settle down for the rest of the season. The reason they would take such risks during the winter was because Emperor Chuutatsu, Shoukei's father, had forbid entertainers to work except when the fields lay fallow.

After his death, many Red Banner troubadours chose to pack it in during the winter. Some still continued to tour. During the winter, there was nothing to do in the towns and villages. When a Red Banner troupe showed up, they'd be welcomed with open arms. That was enough to motivate more than a few of them to brave the elements and keep trudging from town to town.

"It was a really great show."

"I liked the acrobats the best."

Her head bowed, Shoukei listened to the accounts of their delightful day. She was dying to say how she used to see similar performances all the time at the palace.

"Oh, yes!" said a girl. "And the story they told about the empress of the Kingdom of Kei. She's only sixteen or seventeen!"

"What?" Shoukei raised her head.

"Isn't that something? An empress is the same as a god, right? I wonder what it would be like to become one of the twelve rulers of the whole earth, the elite of the elite."

The other girls nodded. "Yeah."

"I would definitely wear silk, with the embroidered plumage of a bird. And gold and silver and pearls."

"And there was this pretend empress who started doing whatever she felt like and the new empress clobbered her. That must have been something to see."

"Because the Imperial En helped her with reinforcements."

"Wow, to think she even knows the Imperial En!"

"You know, they must know each other real well if he'd come to her rescue like that."

"Don't you wonder what the coronation ceremony was like? I bet she was all gorgeous and everything."

Shoukei stared down at her feet. The boisterous voices faded away. *A sixteen or seventeen year old girl. Who had become empress.*

Shoukei knew what living in a palace was like—totally different from this remote corner of the world.

It's not fair, she said to herself. She was stuck in this miserable life while a girl her same age was enjoying everything that had been taken from her. Shoukei had no way of returning to the palace. Her wonderful parents had been killed and she'd been exiled to the hinterlands where she would spend the rest of her life.

She looked at the shovel in her hands. Hands tanned like leather from toiling under a blazing sun, hands whose protruding joints had grown accustomed to carrying heavy loads, hands that bent like claws, with no one to manicure and care for them. She would grow old like this. As if adapting themselves to living in this hick town, her mind and body were going to seed as well. In time, she'd turn into a boorish old hag like Gobo.

And all the while, the empress of Kei would reside at the palace, eternally as beautiful as she was at sixteen.

"It's not fair."

Deep within her heart, another voice chimed in.

It's unforgivable.

Part III

Chapter 11

[3-1] The month drew to a close. In Gyouten, the capital city of Kei, the giddy atmosphere finally dissipated. A sense of calm returned to the handling of visitors and the reaction to the coronation in general. The topsy-turvy of the palace settled down. Nevertheless, with the midwinter *Koushi* ceremony approaching, there was still that sense of being kept constantly on her toes.

Youko looked out the window and sighed softly. Through the windowpanes she could see the wintry gardens and fields.

Mornings she spent at the *Gaiden*. Afternoons she returned to the *Naiden*. These two buildings were where the empress did the bulk of her work. In basic terms, the Privy Council met in the Gaiden and the Naiden was where she performed her official duties as empress.

The Naiden essentially began where the Outer Palace ended and the Gaiden began where the Inner Palace ended.

As a matter of course, the government functionaries who worked in the Outer Palace were not allowed to pass further into the palace than the Naiden. The empress's living quarters were mostly found in the Inner Palace, and she was not supposed to transgress the Outer Palace further than the Gaiden.

Youko had a visitor. He entered the Naiden accompanied by a palace guard. Seeing who her guest was, she raised her eyebrows.

Chousai Seikyou. *Chousai* was his title, Prime Minister Seikyou of the Rikkan, or Six Ministries. The Six Ministries themselves were known as the Ministries of Heaven, Earth, Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter. They handled the various affairs of the palace, the census and apportionment of lands, ritual and protocol, defense, justice and public works. Historically, the *Taisai*, or the head of the Ministry of Heaven, assumed the post of Chousai and the administration of the Rikkan. But more recently the appointment of the Chousai simply followed

established tradition.

Youko was never sure of how to deal with the magisterial-looking Chousai.

"I beg your pardon, Highness," said Seikyou, prostrating himself before the throne.

"What is it?"

"The matter of workforce management, if you please."

This again, Youko said to herself, biting her lip. Keiki wasn't available to assist her as her chief advisor during the afternoon executive sessions on governmental affairs. He had to attend to his duties as marquis of Ei Province. And when Keiki wasn't around, Youko was at a loss when it came to even the basic workings of government. That was probably why Seikyou always showed up in the afternoon.

The realm had fallen to ruin due to the previous empress's mismanagement, wrecked by the ongoing calamities, strife and *youma* rampages. Simply getting things back to normal would require a massive amount of civil engineering.

Over the past several days, the discussions in the Privy Council had centered around this matter. The question of where the work should begin and according to what criteria laborers should be recruited and deployed was still up in the air.

Youko gathered that the council members had more or less divided into factions. The biggest faction was led by Seikyou. The proposals of his faction were completely at odds with those of the opposing faction. He insisted that, until the spring, flood control measures should be emphasized. The opposing faction insisted that in order for the most people survive the winter, the rebuilding of the cities should be paramount.

Only this morning, Seikyou had again repeated his position before the Privy Council, and now he had come on bended knee to assess her disposition on the subject.

"How is Your Highness resolved as to the matter?"

Youko was momentarily at a loss as how to answer. Both flood control and urban reconstruction were equally important. But which one should be given

priority? Kei was not wealthy enough to take on both simultaneously. This was the decision she had been left to unsuccessfully wrestle with.

Moreover, in either case, she was completely incapable of fathoming *which* flood control measures and urban renewal programs were at issue. She'd read the reports prepared by the Ministry of Summer, but had no idea where these places were, what kind of places they were, or the nature of the relief required.

"I'm sorry but I really don't know."

She spoke in a muted voice. Admitting her ignorance really grated.

Seikyou sighed to himself. "Your Highness, this is a decision that you must make."

"I'm sorry."

"I am aware that your Highness comes to us from Yamato. However, I trust that by now you have come to some understanding of the situation."

"I am educating myself but my understanding is incomplete. I am sorry."

"At this point, we need only determine which of these programs shall be given priority."

"I'll talk it over with Keiki and come to a decision."

Seikyou again sighed deeply. "Forgive my forwardness, Your Highness. But is it your intent that the Taiho rule in your stead? The Taiho's first thoughts are always on the alleviation of the people's suffering. Given control of everything, the Taiho will always act out of pity, even to the ruin of the kingdom."

"I know." To a kirin, the suffering of the people took priority over everything else. "But I truly haven't come to a decision."

Seikyou briefly bowed his head. When he raised his head the look on his face was either that of scorn or discouragement. In any case, she knew that he was getting fed up with her. He said, and there was exasperation in his voice, "Forgive me for being presumptuous, but perhaps you could delegate the matter to one of your subordinates?"

When it came right down to it, time was of the essence and Youko had no choice but to agree. She said, "Sure. Fine. It's all your responsibility, Chousai."

Seikyou bowed low.

Youko watched Seikyou leave and groaned aloud.

Remarkably, the problem-plagued imperial ministries had been reorganized and the holes in the dike plugged for the time being. The harmful statutes enacted by the Late Empress Yo had been repealed, the rule of law reestablished. A large part of the military budget had been diverted to assist the refugees, and the year's tax assessments cut.

Bit by bit the kingdom was starting to move forward. That's what everybody assured her.

Everybody was happy that a new empress now occupied the throne. Exactly what they were happy for, Youko wasn't sure. What she knew about this world barely rose to the level of common sense. Called upon to make a decision, she prevaricated. Giving orders was next to impossible.

Any proposal she made would just get laughed at. Worse, except for Imperial Rescripts, any proposal would have to be approved first by the Sankou and then by the Rikkan. Aside from the ceremonial formalities involved with the Inaugural Rescript itself, there was nothing to prevent her from issuing additional Imperial Rescripts. But she didn't have the courage to start issuing rescripts. In the final analysis, she was stuck with the Rikkan that the Late Empress Yo had left to her, and did whatever they told her to.

Such is the lot of the Imperial Kei.

Youko laughed derisively at herself. The rejoicing at her accession reached even to the palace. Who could begin to imagine the reality of what even Rakushun and the Imperial En and Enki had congratulated her for?

"Your Highness."

Keiki came into the executive chambers, having completed his administrative duties. "It seems that Chousai was recently here."

"Yeah, he was. That business of workforce deployment. I left it all up to him."

"You left it all up to him?"

"Shouldn't I have?"

Keiki answered her question with a disappointed expression on his face.

"Look, I didn't know which one to give priority to. I didn't know because I don't know anything about the conditions of this country. So I handed it over to somebody who did. You disagree?"

"No. That would seem a satisfactory solution." But he sighed.

Youko sighed as well. Since her coronation, she'd heard that sigh any number of times. "If you think I shouldn't have, then go ahead and say so."

"It is always wise to listen to what your ministers have to say. If Your Highness then decided to delegate this responsibility, I see no reason to object."

So why the sour face? Youko thought, looking into his impassive countenance. All she sensed from him was a vague sense of dissatisfaction. "If you're not happy with me for some reason, let me know. If there's something you think I should be doing, let's hear it."

A hard edge came to her voice. She was giving everybody reason to sigh, even him, and was getting sick and tired of it.

Keiki said, that same stoic expression on his face, "As you wish. As empress, you rule the kingdom according to the council of your ministers. There is nothing wrong with listening with an open mind to what they have to say. But simply handing the entire matter over to Chousai is likely to make the others unhappy. When taking advice from the civil service, you must be sure to consider all contributions equally."

"I do."

Keiki's expression didn't change. "If, upon taking all points of view into consideration, you then decided to delegate the matter to Chousai, I don't believe anybody would complain."

"Are you unhappy with me too, Keiki?"

Your Highness? the expression on her counselor's face asked, his eyes widening.

"Dissatisfied with another empress? Am I a disappointment to you?"

They all looked at her with suspicious, doubting eyes. *Oh, for the good old days*

of Emperor Tatsu, she could hear them saying. They simply couldn't accept another empress on the throne.

"Nothing of the sort."

Youko averted her gaze and rested her elbows on the table. "You're the one who put me on this throne. So don't look at me like that."

"Your Highness, I . . ."

Youko interrupted him. "Go away."

Chapter 12

[3-2] *Oh, so you were born in Japan as well?*

“Yes,” Suzu answered with a nod.

And you were swept onto the shores of this world. How unfortunate.

“It was awful,” Suzu agreed.

I know, I know. Nobody in this world can truly understand how difficult a kaikyaku’s life is. But I do.

“Yes, it is. It’s really, really tough,” Suzu said. “But I’m so happy to have met the Imperial Kei.”

I’m pleased as well. You have nothing to worry about anymore. You’re a fellow kaikyaku like me. I’ll do whatever I can to help you. If there’s anything troubling you, let me know.

“I am indeed grateful, Your Highness. I . . .”

Suzu turned over on her cot. Her imagination failed her. She couldn’t think of what to say next.

Since hearing about the Imperial Kei from Riyoushi, she’d carried on this conversation with herself night after night. The Imperial Kei would be full of sympathy for her. They’d converse about Japan, about the trials of the past, their plans for the future. Suzu had no power, no wealth, no freedom. Surely, the Imperial Kei would come to her rescue.

How can I help you?

Could she demand that Suzu be sent to Kei to live in the palace? A luxurious palace with generous and kindhearted servants—not like Suibi Manor. They would talk together and stroll through the gardens. And while she was at it, how about giving Riyoushi a taste of her own medicine?

This child is my fellow countrywoman. If you have treated her badly, I shall never forgive you.

When the Imperial Kei said that, Riyou would grovel at her feet. She'd be sorry, then. No matter how bitter, faced with the power and authority of the empress, she would have no choice but to comply.

I shall name Suzu mistress of Suibi Manor. Riyou will be her servant.

"No, that isn't necessary," Suzu said, shaking her head. "That is not what I want. I only desire that the mistress of the manor show me some kindness and gratitude. That alone would be sufficient."

My my, Suzu, you are a good person.

The Imperial Kei smiling at her, Riyou's grateful eyes meeting hers.

"Not hardly," Suzu muttered to herself. "Riyou would never thank me for anything."

She wrapped the quilt around her shoulders. Still, if she could only meet the Imperial Kei, that would make up for everything.

As she closed her eyes, Suzu heard high tone of a ringing bell. Outside a winter wind was blowing. The high tone mingled with the sounds of the dry, rustling brush, the turbulent chorus of wind weaving through the undulating peaks.

Suzu suddenly sat up and listened more closely. The bell clanged again, Riyou calling a servant. Suzu hurriedly slipped out of bed, threw a robe over her nightdress, hastily tied the sash and ran out of the room.

What was going on in the middle of the night?

Riyou didn't care when her servants went to sleep or woke up. Suzu's room had cots for three servants. The other two had quit a long time ago. Even at the cost of losing their place in the Registry of Wizards, they'd decided to run away and had been fortunate and lucky enough to carry it off. At least that's what the other maidservants said.

Urged along by the shrill, incessant sound of the bell, Suzu ran down the hallways and into Riyou's quarters. A pair of servants had arrived ahead of her. As soon as she entered the room, Riyou's vituperations flew at her.

"You're late! You're such an idiot and slowpoke!"

"I am sorry. I was asleep."

"So was everybody else. You're such a sluggard the stable hands got here before you, and you're supposed to be my personal maid!"

The man and woman who had arrived first averted their gaze. Were they careless enough to rise to Suzu's defense, they would feel the brunt of Riyou's scorn as well.

"I beg your forgiveness."

"Even when asleep, servants should be attentive to the needs of their master. That's why I deign to provide you with room and board in the first place."

Suzu bowed her head. The strange fruits that grew on the mountain, the yield from a plot of land in the ravine, a modest stipend from the national treasury, the meager rent from the fields at the base of the mountain farmed by the locals, taxes collected from the shrine village below Suibi Peak—this was the totality of Riyou's income, and what Suzu and all the others had to live on.

"This is unbelievable! Twelve servants and only three bother to show up!"

Riyou looked at the middle-aged woman. "You! I can't bear this cold. Massage my feet for me. Honma!"

She undoubtedly meant this scornful epithet for Suzu. "It's stale in here. The place needs to be aired out. Go wake everybody up. That's your punishment. The entire manor needs a good cleaning. It's because of all this dust."

You mean *now*? Suzu swallowed the words that came to her lips. If Riyou said do it, she had to do it.

"I am unfortunately surrounded by servants who can't clean a blessed thing to my satisfaction. Unbelievable. And be quiet about it. I'm trying to sleep!"

Suzu had no choice but to go around and wake everybody up. Even if it was on Riyou's orders, nobody was ever happy about being pulled out of bed in the middle of the night, and they all turned their resentment on her. Her head bowed, she did as she was told. In the wintry dead of night they shook the dust out of everything, wiped, mopped, scrubbed and dried the stone-lined hallways. The winter solstice was almost upon them. The water at this time of night was freezing cold.

Your Highness.

As she scrubbed the floor, the tears welled up. A girl from Japan had become empress of the Kingdom of Kei. That pleased her immeasurably. Wouldn't they meet, somewhere, sometime? Meeting her would be the happiest moment in her life. Imagining that moment was so gratifying, and awakening from the dream so miserable.

Your Highness, please help me.

The cleaning took them until sunrise. After a brief nap, morning chores awaited. Riyou awoke toward noon and inspected the work. She expressed displeasure with the effort and told them to do it all over again. This was when Suzu broke a vase.

"What a good-for-nothing you are!" said Riyou, flinging the broken shards at her. "The cost of this vase will come out of your meals. You're a wizard, after all. You won't starve to death. And I'm a charitable enough person that I won't revoke your wizardhood." Riyou hiked up her eyebrows. "You don't like it? Then why not pack your bags and leave?"

Leaving the manor would mean having her name erased from the Registry of Wizards. Riyou knew that was something Suzu could not do.

"Of course you won't." She snorted. "You really are a useless child. It is only because I am such an extraordinarily generous person that I bother to keep you around."

Suzu lowered her face and bit her lip. Could she leave this place? She swallowed the thought as soon as it came into her mind.

"I've been treating you too well. You don't really need a bed, do you?"

Suzu looked up at her.

"Every minute you're sleeping in a nice, warm bed you're not doing any work. Don't you think so?" Riyou laughed with open malice. "You may sleep in the barn for the time being. It's so spacious in there and not so cold. Yes, that would suit you well."

That meant sleeping with Setsuko, Riyou's tiger. Suzu's face went pale. Setsuko

was not an animal easily handled by others. She was such a ferocious creature that only one man was assigned to be her handler.

"Forgive me, please, Mistress," quailed Suzu, trembling with fear.

Riyou stared down at her with undisguised scorn. "Oh, you'll do it. You ask so much of me. Who do you think you are?"

Riyou laughed and said with an exaggerated sigh, "Well, all right. Instead, you can go get me some *kankin*."

"Mistress . . ."

Kankin was a species of mossy mushroom that grew on the cliffs of the towering mountain. Picking them required rappelling down the side of the cliffs.

"Gather some kankin for breakfast tomorrow morning and you can consider yourself forgiven."

Chapter 13

[3-3] When Riyou told her to do something, Suzu knew of no way to refuse. So on a cold, dark night, with the light of a single lamp to guide her, she climbed Suibi Peak. Clinging to the rope, she searched for a footing amongst the rocks and shrubs. Gales of wind buffeted her. Standing on the narrow path that wound along the crest of the ridge, she had to bend over to face the full strength of the wind.

The precarious cliffs where the kankin mushroom grew were located halfway up the peak. Suzu tied one end of the rope to a pine tree with its roots anchored into the rock. The other end she fastened around her waist. Clinging to the rope, she started to slowly lower herself down the side of the cliff, but the gusts of wind made her hesitate.

The peaks of these towering mountains were extraordinarily tall. Even holding the lantern over her head, Suzu couldn't see the base of the cliff she was descending. The wind rushing skyward out of the pitch-black hole seemed to cut right through her. The mere thought of lowering herself into these depths with only the one strand of rope to rely on made her weep with fear.

Why did Riyou despise her so much? It would have been better if they'd never met. It was difficult living in a foreign country where she didn't speak the language. But she had to believe that life was still possible even if she couldn't comprehend a single word.

Why do I put up with this hell?

She'd catch a worse beating if she didn't get those mushrooms. Even knowing that, she couldn't move her shivering feet.

I have to meet the Imperial Kei. If I could . . .

But all the daydreams in the world wouldn't change the reality of the black cliffs in front of her eyes. There was nothing else.

Should I run away? Should I leave this place behind for good?

If she could return to Japan, she would without a second thought. That was

something wizards could do, but there were wizards and then there were wizards. For a wizard like Suzu, crossing the Kyokai was impossible.

She clung to the edge of the cliff and wept. Suddenly she heard a sound behind her, the sound like the purring of a cat. Suzu lifted her head and raised the lantern. The tiger Setsuko hovered in the air just beyond the precipice.

Suzu gulped and took a step back. Setsuko floated there in the air, as if ready to pounce. Its jewel-like eyes glittered in the light from the lantern.

"You," the tiger growled insistently at her.

Wizards could grasp the gist of what the tiger was saying, but a wizard of Suzu's status couldn't actually speak the language of beasts.

"The Mistress."

Riyou hadn't been intending all along to feed her to this *you*-creature, had she? Did she send her out to this solitary mountain crag so this tiger could attack her? Did she hate her that much? But why?

The tiger motioned with its head as if to hurry her along, urging her to just get on with it. So was Riyou spying on her? Making sure that Suzu did as she was told? That's why she sent the tiger after her.

"I know, I know," Suzu answered in a trembling voice. "I'll do it."

She grasped the rope with her shaking hands and little by little inched towards the edge of the cliff. Playing out the rope as she went along, she planted her feet on the edge and stopped, her body suspended in the air. She couldn't move.

I can't do it.

Raw fear prevented her from descending any further.

"I can't. I'm sorry."

The hand holding fast to her lifeline shook as she were convulsing. If it went on any longer, she could fall for sure. Her hand would slip and she'd let go of the rope.

"Please . . . help . . ."

A moment later, her hand did slip. Suzu was cast backwards into the air. *I'm*

falling, she thought. She'd completely forgotten about the rope tied to her waist.

When she came to, Suzu was floating in the air. The face of the cliff was directly in front of her. The ground beneath her was soft to the touch.

So the ground wasn't that far down, after all. She gasped in relief. Then the sensation of soft fur. Setsuko. She was lying on the tiger's back. She screamed. "No! Let me down!"

A moment later the ground disappeared out from under her. Her body was tossed into the sky. She felt herself falling. She clawed at the air, as if in a dream. And then gagged as the Setsuko grabbed the collar of her jacket. She screamed again. With a flick of its head the tiger again tossed her body into the sky. When she landed once more on the tiger's back, she hung on with all her strength.

It can't get any worse.

She remembered that the rope was still fastened to her waist. She could climb back up the cliff face using the rope. With trembling hands she drew in the slack on the rope until, abruptly, there was nothing more there.

"Oh no, it's been cut."

Suzu looked at Setsuko's boulder-sized head. She had no choice but to hold on and let it take her back. But why would this creature, who could not be ridden by anyone but Riyuu, return her to the manor?

"T-take me back." Suzu pleaded with the tiger. "Please, take me back to the top of the cliff."

She felt something warm trickling down her back. It was blood, she thought, her mind swimming, from where Setsuko's fangs had gouged her skin. The pain was severe.

"Please. Help me."

The tiger moved. It came closer to the cliff, approached one of the shrubs growing there. With a deep, ferocious growl it admonished her. *Do your duty*, it was telling her.

Suzu clung to the tiger. She cautiously reached out with one hand, but

couldn't reach. A strong gust knocked her sideways. The stronger the wind, the stronger her panic. Her teeth chattering, her knees knocking, she knew this wasn't going to work.

Apprehensively, she let go with both hands. But as she leaned towards the cliff, she tumbled from the tiger's back. She collided with the face of the cliff, gashing her skin. Setsuko caught her with a claw through her sash and for the third time tossed her onto its back.

Suzu broke down weeping. "Why?" It was all too much. "Why is she doing this to me? Why does she hate me so much?" Suzu hit the tiger with her fists. "Let go of me! Kill me if that's what you want! Enough is enough!"

Setsuko answered only with a low rumble in her throat.

Take me way from here. It was the first thing that came to her mind. "Where to?" she asked herself timidly. If she ran away, her name would be erased from the Registry of Wizards, and that would be the end of her.

"To Kei."

Go to the Imperial Kei. But how? She'd meet with the Imperial Kei and appeal to her, tell her about her miserable conditions and Riyou's tyrannical rule.

Suzu suddenly raised her head. "That's right! If I appeal to the empress here, I won't have to worry about the Imperial Kei!"

She grabbed Setsuko's coat hard enough to pull the hair out by the roots. "I'll petition the Imperial Court! I'll get the empress to punish Riyou and keep my name in the Registry of Wizards!"

Suzu whacked Setsuko as hard as she could. "Go! We're going to Choukan Palace in Yuunei!"

Setsuko reared up without warning. Suzu held on for dear life as the tiger's body turned and twisted in the air. Swept into this world, she had survived only by debasing herself. And yet she'd picked her first fight ever with Setsuko. The tiger flailed about, trying to buck her off. At length it gave up and galloped off through the wind, heading straight to the northeast.

Its destination was Yuunei, the capital of Sai.

The capital city of Yuunei. Somebody was pounding on the gates before the Hall of Government. The night was approaching dawn. Alarmed at what could be afoot at this time of night, the guardsmen rushed to the gate and discovered there a red tiger, and in the tiger's shadow, a young girl clinging to the post.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came from Suibi Manor on Mt. Ha. Please help me!"

The guardsmen lowered their spears to keep the tiger at bay. They assumed the girl had been attacked by this *you*-creature. After giving them a haughty glare, the tiger turned his back to them and flew off. The guardsmen breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Miss, are you all right?"

In the light of the breaking day, the girl's sad state became apparent. Her clothes were torn and stained with blood. Her tangled, tousled hair was also wet with blood.

"Were you attacked? Are you all right?"

Suzu clung to the guardsman who was helping to her feet. *It's a miracle. I made it to Yuunei.* She cried, "You've got to help me! The mistress of Suibi Manor is trying to kill me!"

The guardsmen all looked at each other.

"I'm begging you. Help me!"

Chapter 14

[3-4] The peerage system of the Twelve Kingdoms was organized according to the following seven ranks: king, prince, province lord (or marquis), count (or minister), province minister (or viscount), baron, and knight. There were two ranks of count, count and vice minister (or undersecretary), and three subdivisions each of baron and knight. All the nobility was divided among these twelve castes.

At the level of national government, most counts were vice ministers or undersecretaries. *Hisen* (wizards of the air) were allowed to rise to the rank of full count or minister. *Hisen* like Riyou who'd been elevated according to imperial edict were granted vice-ministerial status. The rank of servant wizards fell between that of knight and baron, which was higher than the typical government bureaucrat.

Such gradations in rank were designed primarily for purposes of decorum and propriety. For example, when a person of lower rank encountered a person of higher rank on the road, who would yield the right of way. In other words, it ideally amounted to the authority to demand to be treated with the proper courtesy and not much else.

In any case, after collapsing in front of the Hall of Government, Suzu was treated very well. She was taken to a room reserved for honored guests. A doctor and nurse tended to her and she was cared for with the utmost courtesy. They were only being polite but being treated politely was a first to her. She had grown up poor, her family having to kowtow to the landlord. She'd been forced to crawl under Riyou's heel. Compared to all that, this was like a dream.

I must be dreaming, she thought as she fell asleep. She woke herself up to consider her situation some more. The bed was suffused with a soft light.

"Are you awake? How are you feeling?" The lady's maid waiting aside the bed noticed that she had opened her eyes. She spoke in a soft voice.

Suzu said, "I'm doing okay." She sat up. Her joints ached. She grimaced.

"Please, rest yourself. Do you wish to partake of breakfast?"

"Um, yes."

The lady smiled kindly. "We shall make sure of it, then. Thanks be, but none of your wounds was severe. Breakfast is presently being prepared, and a doctor shall see to you shortly. So, please, make yourself at home."

"Thank you," said Suzu. Watching the lady as she left the room, Suzu hugged her arms around herself. "*Please make yourself at home.* That gorgeously-dressed lady's maid said *that to me.*"

I can hardly believe it. Is this really happening?

The canopy of the bed had already been raised and folded back. The door into the bedchambers was open. The bed itself was like a small room raised on a platform. Looking around the bedchambers, Suzu hugged herself again.

"Not even Riyou's bedchambers are this fine."

The brocaded bedding was warm yet light. It really was a shame she had slept here in her dirty undershirt. The canopy was woven from two layers of fabric, a beautiful embroidery in sheer silk on the one side and a heavier brocade on the other. On either side of the wide bed was an intricately crafted ebony table. There was a shelf also made from ebony, and an ebony footstool for climbing in and out of the bed. The kimono armoire was made of silver.

Suzu gazed absently around the canopy bed and then around the light-filled room beyond the bed. "This is so much nicer than *anything* Riyou has."

Suzu didn't know it, but this was the finest room in the guest palace. Because her status at the manor was unknown, they'd treated her like a viscount, the highest status the servant of a *hisen* can achieve.

She was blankly taking it all in when the doctor came in. He again respectfully examined Suzu's wounds, treated her, and then with a deep bow, exited the room. On his way out, he passed the lady's maid, who came in to ready her meal.

The utensils were silver. The change of clothes she set out were made of brightly colored silk.

It truly must be all a dream.

"Are you in any pain?" the lady's maid asked her.

Suzu shook her head. "Thank you, but I'm fine."

"If you are feeling well enough, I wish to take you to meet someone."

"I think I'll feel up to it. Who wants to see me?"

The lady's maid bowed her head. "It would seem that the empress wishes to meet with you."

Suzu's eye went wide.

I don't believe it, Suzu repeated to herself as the lady's maid led her deep into the Imperial Palace. *I'm really going to meet the empress.*

The empress of the Kingdom of Sai had occupied the throne for not yet twenty years. The Imperial Sai was beloved by her subjects because of her righteous rule. Beyond that, Suzu knew nothing about her.

They went through a gate and walked up a flight of stairs. Each building they passed through grew more and more opulent. Ruby pillars and white walls, vividly painted balustrades, windows glazed with crystal glass. The doorknobs were all gold. The floors finished with engraved stone, inlaid here and there with mosaics of china tile.

The lady's maid stopped and opened a large, splendidly carved wooden door. She took one step inside the room and then knelt down and bowed her head to the floor. Suzu stared flabbergasted at her surroundings, then caught herself and hurriedly copied what the lady's maid was doing.

The lady's maid said, "Forgive my intrusion, but I have brought with me the wizardess of whom we spoke earlier."

Her head bowed, Suzu couldn't see who she was talking to. She listened carefully, steeling herself for the fearful, commanding sound. Instead, she heard a woman's soft voice.

"Thank you. She does seems a young thing."

It was the voice of an older woman. There was no scorn, no bitterness in the voice. Rather, it was an encouraging tone.

"Come over here and sit down."

Suzu timidly lifted her head. They were in a wide, resplendent room. An elderly woman was standing next to a large black desk.

"Um . . ." She fumbled for words, not knowing whether to ask, *Are you the Imperial Sai?*

The woman smiled warmly at her. "Please get up. If you've been injured in any way, I wouldn't make you uncomfortable. Tea? Please, here."

She indicated the chair where Suzu was to sit, and then nodded to the attending servants, who arranged the tea set on the table. Suzu apprehensively got to her feet. Instinctively, she raised her hands and laced her fingers together as if in prayer. "Um . . . are you the Imperial Sai? I mean, Your Highness?"

The woman answered affirmatively with a friendly smile.

The Imperial Sai's family name was Chuu, her given name Kin. The name she had taken as empress was Kouko.

"I . . . ah . . . my . . ."

"Don't worry about formalities. Relax. Now, you've come from Suibi Manor, is that right?"

Kouko pulled out the chair for her. Nervously, Suzu sat down on the edge of the seat. "Yes."

"And your name is?"

"Suzu."

"Suzu?"

"Um . . . I'm a *kaikyaku*."

Really, Kouko's eyes said, widening. "That is indeed unusual. How did you come to be a wizardess?"

With a disconsolate sigh, Suzu recounted the story that for ages she'd been longing to tell another person. How she had been swept into this world, the tears spilled in frustration at not being able to comprehend the language. How she met Riyou, the first person who understood her, and begged to be made a

wizard.

Kouko listening attentively, with the occasional word urging her to continue.

The mistress of Suibi Manor had been appointed hisen by an emperor many generations before. Unlike the *chisen* (wizards of the earth), hisen did not take part in government. Their distinguishing characteristic was simply that they were long-lived. There were hisen who served the gods, but for the most part they lived secluded lives.

Hisen wizards were not appointed often. In the end, many tired of eternal life and gave up their place in the Registry of Wizards. There were presently only three hisen in the Kingdom of Sai, and the whereabouts of the other two were unknown. Wizards who had their names removed from the Registry often simply disappeared, and neither hide nor hair of them was seen again.

"So Riyou is the mistress of Suibi Manor."

"Yes," Suzu nodded.

"What caused your wounds? Were they inflicted by Riyou?"

In answer to her question, Suzu recounted the events of the previous night. Riyou had ordered her to pick *kankin* mushrooms. She had encountered Riyou's red tiger at the edge of the cliff. Petrified by the tiger's gaze, she had fallen from the precipice.

"That sounds awful. But are you saying that you were sent out to pick mushrooms in the middle of the night?"

"The Mistress does not care about such things. She wanted mushrooms for breakfast and thought nothing of making such a demand. She hates me anyway." Simply thinking about it now brought tears to her eyes. "She was always telling me that she was going to kick me out and erase my name from the Registry of Wizards. I don't speak the language, so if that happened it would be the same as being struck deaf and dumb."

Kouko looked at the weeping girl. Hisen were not involved with the government so she'd never meet Riyou. The government's only obligation in turn was a budget appropriation for the maintenance of the Registry. Hisen didn't meddle in the kingdom's business and the kingdom didn't meddle in theirs. That

had been standard operating procedure for ages.

"Well, then, I suppose I could speak with the mistress of the manor. In the meantime, you may stay here and recuperate."

Suzu gazed up at her. "She may be removing my name from the Registry as we speak."

"You needn't worry about it. If such a request is made, I would have to approve it. If the mistress of the manor does in fact make such a request, I promise to deny it."

"Really?" Suzu stared earnestly into her face. Kouko answered with a smile. Suzu sighed in relief. She had finally, after such a long, long time, been freed from the constant threat and fear. "Thank you. I am so very thankful."

She slid down from the chair and prostrated herself on the floor. After this, she wouldn't be frightened of anything ever again.

Chapter 15

[3-5] The barn and small garden behind the orphanage were covered in snow. The interior of the barn, usually warmed somewhat by the breath of the animals, was quiet and cold. Shoukei stamped her frozen feet to take the chill out of her toes.

The snow piled up deeper every day. The villagers had only recently gathered in the town from the outlying hamlets and the air was thick with the lively back and forth of the year's news. Come the new year, however, and by the end of January people would be getting fed up with each other's company. Spending the winter shut up together like this was one long trial. Pent-up feelings got out of hand and petty disputes started breaking out. About the time the bad blood really began to flow it'd be springtime, and everybody would happily return to the countryside, raring to go.

She doesn't have the slightest idea what it feels like.

As she hauled along the feed for the animals, Shoukei cursed the far-off empress of the eastern kingdom.

She had no idea what it felt like to live the threadbare life of a country bumpkin, wearing clothes reeking with the stench of farm animals, hands so chapped and frostbitten that the skin cracked and bled, sleeping under a freezing blanket in a drafty, clapboard house so cold that in the morning frost covered the walls.

I know. And what kind of life are you living?

Silk curtains, scented bedding, a warm room suffused with light, disturbed by not a single errant breeze. Silk hems trailing behind her as she walked along, the *obidama* jewels in her waistband and tiara sparkling so brightly. Servants at her beck and call, ministers prostrating themselves before her. Her throne resting on a floor paved with gems, the throne and screens carved with an unsurpassed and delicate craftsmanship, inlaid with precious stones and lined with golden bunting and silver rattan.

Ah, yes, those were her father's most sublime treasures. And now *she* had everything that Shoukei had lost. She was never hungry or cold and never would be. Worshiped by thousands, wielding authority over every official in the land . . .

With every step Shoukei took, a hole opened wider in her soul. Her silent imprecations swirled into the maw. At some point, without really noticing it, she'd come to believe that everything taken from her had been stolen by the newly-crowned empress of Kei.

Unforgivable.

"Gyokuyou!"

The shrill, jeering voice brought her back to her senses. She blinked, her mind blank. Then she realized that her name was being called. She hurriedly glanced around.

Gobo was standing behind her, staring daggers at her. "How long you going to take divvying up this feed, huh? If you think dawdling around here's going to get you out of helping make breakfast, you've got another thing coming."

"I'm sorry. I just got distracted there for a moment."

"I don't want to hear your excuses!" Gobo grabbed a nearby stick and whacked Shoukei on the legs. "You should be working three or four times as hard as everybody else. You can't make anybody in this town feed you. You have to earn your keep with your own filthy hands."

"Sorry," Shoukei said in a small voice.

She had no choice but to put up with it. Humbly hang her head and it'd blow over sooner or later. She'd learned long ago that it was the only thing she could do. She was waiting for Gobo to spit out a nasty aside and leave when another swift blow with the stick caught her by surprise.

"How about for once you apologize like you really mean it!"

Shoukei fell to her knees and collapsed in the straw, suddenly aware of the fierce pain in her shoulders.

"You think you're getting picked on by some fussy old hag? You give me lip service like that and you think I'm going to let you get away with it?"

"I . . . "

Gobo once again swung the stick at her. Shoukei curled into a ball as the fierce blows fell on her back.

"Why do I drag your dead weight around with me? Why is it up to us to put food in your mouth? Why did the children of this orphanage have to lose their parents? Huh? Do you even have the slightest idea?"

Shoukei bit her lip. No matter how often she was struck she wouldn't say a word.

"Everything is that Chuutatsu's fault! Your father!"

That has nothing to do with me, Shoukei cried to herself as she lay on the ground. *Ah, but Her Highness, the Imperial Kei, knows nothing of this life!* Her teeth still clenched together, Shoukei heard a faint voice.

"Is it true?"

She lifted her head. Gobo as well looked back over her shoulder. One of the orphan girls was standing stock still in the doorway of the barn.

"What are you doing here . . ."

"You mean, Gyokuyou's father was Chuutatsu? So that means Gyokuyou is the princess royal?" Her eyes crawled over Shoukei. "That means she's Princess Shoukei!"

Gobo was at a loss as to how to answer. Shoukei just stared at the girl. With a start, the girl spun around and ran to the back of the orphanage. "The princess royal is here!" she called out. "The daughter of those killers!"

The children came in a rush. They stared at the dumbstruck Shoukei in amazement. Several of them darted up to her. Shoukei's face went white. Children's voices rang out from the front yard. She soon heard a loud commotion and the sound of more footsteps approaching.

"She's the princess royal?"

"Really?"

The inflamed throng surrounded Shoukei, driving her into the corner of the

shed.

"It's true! Gobo said so herself!"

"Is that right, Gobo?"

Their gaze all fell on Gobo. Shoukei gazed beseechingly up at her. They locked eyes for a second. Gobo turned to the assembled crowd.

"Yes, it is."

There followed a moment of silence, and then the jeering cries shook the barn.

Shoukei was dragged from the barn and thrown into the snow.

"Wait . . . please . . ."

No sooner had the words come out of her mouth but the blows rained down. She screamed and was sent sprawling.

"Stop!"

The shrill voice rent the air. The realization sank into Shoukei's dazed mind that the voice belonged to Gobo.

"Why should we?"

"Think about it. What do you think she's doing here?"

"What do you mean, what she's doing here?"

"Somebody registered her on the census. And didn't have a bit of trouble doing it. Like I said, think about it! Who could pull off something like that?"

"Who could pull off something like that?" The throng all raised the same question, and then called out the same answer. "The marquis of Kei!"

The province lord of Kei, the commander of the province lords, who killed the emperor.

"If it was him that done it, do you think he'd like it if we beat her to death? The marquis rescued us from that black bastard. We don't fear the empress's henchmen. We don't worry about being dragged off to the gallows. All those odious laws were repealed. The marquis has given us lives of peace and safety."

"But . . ."

"I hate the little princess as well. But if the marquis chose to save her, I'm not taking it upon myself to do contrariwise. It'd be like spitting in his face. I know how you feel, but you've got to keep it in check."

Now she says so. Shoukei clawed at the snow. "You're telling me this *now!* When up till now you've done nothing but torment me for your own entertainment!"

A snowball hit her in the nose. Shoukei covered her face with her hands.

"What are you protecting her for, Gobo? You were the one beating on her!"

"That's right! We get to get even with her, too!"

"Listen, you all . . ."

"While this bitch was lounging around the palace, my mom and dad was getting murdered!"

Shoukei screamed, "They got punished because they broke the law!" It had always been so. People were always criticizing her parents. But her father didn't execute people because he *enjoyed* it. "If things are ever going to get better, a kingdom has got to have laws. Otherwise you'd all do as you damn well pleased! So of course you're going to get punished! You just resent the people that made the laws because you got caught! If nobody was afraid of being punished, nobody would obey the law in the first place!"

Another snowball came flying at her. Shoukei crouched down as the hard balls of ice pelted her one after another.

"So it's okay to kill people then?"

"Just because they get sick and can't work?"

"We had to leave the fields before the harvest to take care of my parents. That's reason enough to cut off their heads?"

"I don't know about any of this!" Shoukei yelled. "It's not my fault! I don't know what my father did! All I saw was what he let me to see!"

They grabbed her and bound her, threw her into the town jail and left her there. After sundown, Gobo came to see her.

"I brought charcoal," she said. "Don't want you to freeze to death."

Shoukei sat back against the cold wall. "I'd rather freeze to death."

"You will soon enough. Right now they're deciding what to do with you."

"Feeling sorry for me, are you? It really is too late in the day for that."

Gobo gave her a cold look. "I don't feel sorry for you. I just don't want to do wrong by the marquis."

Shoukei snorted. "Gekkei! That jackal!"

"Enough!" Gobo said in a resolute voice.

Shoukei haughtily raised her head in turn. "Overthrowing the emperor and sitting yourself on the throne without the Mandate of Heaven, *that* is regicide. No matter how you try to pretty it up." The horrible images from that day welled up in her mind's eyes. "He killed my father. And even that wasn't enough. My mother, too. And Hourin! Gekkei is a traitor. He slaughtered the emperor and kirin and stole the throne."

"Really?" Gobo murmured to herself. "So the emperor and empress consort were executed in front of you?"

"He's a traitor! Don't you know anything?"

Even if she did, the hard expression on her face didn't change. "What I know is that you are rotten down to the marrow of your bones."

"What are you . . ."

"The marquis can't take the throne for himself. He lives at the provincial capital. Just because you're a shameless little hussy doesn't mean that everybody else is as self-centered as you. But if that's what really happened to you, then curse all you want. You won't be able to after too long."

"But of course, you're going to kill me no matter what I say." When Gobo turned her back to her, Shoukei continued to glare at her. *Bring it on, then. I'm tired of you all.*

Gobo said, "It looks like the townspeople aren't coming to their senses, no matter what I say. They're talking about having you drawn and quartered."

Shoukei rose to her feet. "Hold on. They're what?"

Gobo shut the door, abruptly cutting off the light. "Drawn and quartered, you mean?"

It meant tying her arms to a pair of stakes and her legs to two ox carts and then tearing her body in pieces. The most barbaric of all punishments.

Shoukei screamed. There was no one to hear her. In the freezing darkness of the cell, the only light came from the red glow of the coals in the brazier.

Chapter 16

[3-6] *It's all a bad dream*, Shoukei thought as she was dragged from the cell. *All lies*, just more of Gobo's hate at her expense, she told herself over and over. She was taken to the public square in front of the Rishi. The blood froze in her veins.

"It can't be."

The square was lined with people. She saw outsiders there as well. At the center of the wall of people a patch of ground was cleared of snow. Two stakes had been pounded into the earth and two ox carts awaited her.

She looked up at the two men holding her arms. "You're kidding, right? You're not really doing this, right?"

"Oh, getting scared, are you?" one of the men sneered. "But your father did it so often."

The other man gave her a twisted smile. "You should be overjoyed to go out the way your daddy loved the best. Daddy must be dancing in heaven, watching his little girl get her own moment on the stage."

"No . . ."

Shoukei did everything she could to keep stop her forward progress. She planted her feet, resisted with all her might as they pulled her along, slumped to the ground, writhed to get free of their grasp, and to no avail.

"Stop, please."

"Quit your whining!" the man spat at her. "This is how my wife got killed!"

All she had done, he lamented, was wear a hairpin on a visit to a neighboring town. He yanked her as if to jerk her arms out of their sockets. "Giving you a taste of your own medicine doesn't quite make up for it, but it's all we got. So it'll have to do."

"No! Please."

She saw no pity in the faces of the townspeople. With no hope of rescue, she

was pulled down and pinned to the ground. She screamed and wept but these men had not a drop of compassion in them. She folded her arms and drew her knees to her chest. They pulled her arms out and fastened a leather strap around each wrist, turned her face up and stretched out her body and bound her arms to the stakes.

Her eyes wide and searching for help, the dull, overcast sky reflected the empty look on her face. She kicked her legs against the earth. Somebody grabbed her legs. She felt the leather cord being wrapped around her ankles and screamed. She was rendered immobile, literally frozen to the ground.

This can't be happening. Something so dreadful couldn't be happening to her. Her legs were bound with the leather cord. The cord was pulled back and tightened, spreading her legs apart.

Into the corner of her fixed gaze floated a black stain. *Ah, a premonition of death. I should want to die before my body is torn in two.*

Her jaw was wrenched open and a rag was stuffed into her mouth to deny her the easy out of swallowing her tongue. In her line of vision, the black stain grew larger.

The cord tied to her legs was fastened to the carts. The stain spreading across the sky grew a magnitude larger. Suddenly, she saw a man's face leaning over her.

She saw something red in the midst of the black. A crimson red. No, it was a flag.

An ensign.

And then she recognized the shape of the black stain. It was the silhouette of a bird. A great bird with three wings. Swooping down at them. And the silhouette of a rider astride it. The rider bore the red flag. Shoukei recognized the constellation of stars and two tigers on the flag.

Shoukei shut her eyes. Tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes and froze to her temples.

The flag was the ensign of the provincial guard of Kei.

At the sight of the flag, the people crowded into the square caught their collective breath.

A few more minutes and the years of bitterness would have been revenged. Their families murdered in front of them, decapitated, and unable to do anything to save them. Denied even to bury the remains until the appointed time had passed. All that grief and resentment.

The *you-bird* alighted in the square.

"Halt!" the guardsman called out.

Why? sighed many of the people there. Why should he show up now? They looked around for Gobo. She had opposed the execution to the end. They could only imagine that she had informed on them. But Gobo was nowhere to be seen.

The soldier dismounted from the bird. He wore armor and fleece. "Lynching is expressly forbidden!"

But why? Disappointed voices swirled about the square.

The soldier surveyed the scene. He wore the insignia of a provincial general. He held up his arm, signaling the crowd to be quiet. Two more birds descended and landed. The soldiers dismounted and ran into the square and freed the bound girl.

"I understand what you are feeling. But this is not according to the wishes of the marquis."

The murmurs of disappointment and disapproval welled up again. Looking out at them, the general could hear the pain in their voices. The people still held the Late Emperor Chuutatsu in nothing but raw contempt.

An official famous for his honesty and forthrightness, who ferreted out corrupt bureaucrats in high places and would forgive no subordinate who took a bribe—that official's name was Chuutatsu. When he'd been chosen as emperor, the government had, by and large, rejoiced. He would restore the kingdom, rotting under the rule of previous emperors.

Except the laws promulgated in order to stem the decay did not accomplish what Chuutatsu had hoped for. More laws were passed, statutes multiplied, and

hardly before anyone knew it, there were regulations covering everybody from commoner to minister, and everything from what a man wore to the utensils he ate with. And to these regulations were attached harsh penalties.

Laws must be enforced without sentiment. This saying of Chuutatsu was, on the face of it, correct. If pity and compassion were allowed to distort the enforcement of the law, the law would become powerless. The number of people being punished grew alarmingly. This grieved Chuutatsu and he made the penalties even harsher. If ever a voice was raised in protest, a law was passed and that voice was silenced. And so the bodies of the executed criminals piled up in the town squares.

In the year that Chuutatsu had been deposed, in that year alone, three-hundred thousand people were executed. Since his enthronement, the total had reached almost six-hundred thousand, or one person in five.

"I well understand your bitterness, and so does the marquis. That is why he dared to sully his own name and strike Chuutatsu down."

After spurring the province lords to commit regicide, Gekkei withdrew to the provincial capital and retired from politics. The province lords and ministers took up the reins of government, but Gekkei would not participate.

"When the people take it upon themselves to pass judgments and exact punishments according to their own interests, then the law becomes an ass. No matter how deep your indignation, you cannot trifle with the law, declare to your own satisfaction what is a sin and what is not, and avenge wrongs without proper authority."

But! came the cries. The man once again held up his hand.

"The fate of the princess royal has already been settled by the province lords and ministers. Whatever objections you may have with this judgment, taking the law into your own hands cannot be condoned. If smiled upon even once, the rumors would race from this place like a wildfire. You are not the only ones with grievances to settle. The princess royal is not the only person so loathed. You know many executioners have hidden themselves away for fear of being lynched. More than the most cruel punishments, this kind of retribution would eat our kingdom alive. I am asking you to please consider the fate of our kingdom and

act prudently."

He gazed out at the bowed heads. "We shall protect our kingdom and deliver it to the new emperor without shame or regret. How can we expect enlightened rule from our future emperor if we hand over to him a kingdom ravaged by revenge? The province lords and ministers are all working toward that end, and we all ask for your support in doing so."

The girl was bundled onto the *you-bird*'s back. Silence descended on the square, a silence soon swept away by sound of weeping.

Part IV

Chapter 17

[4-1] Shoukei opened her eyes. She was lying on a gorgeously-arrayed canopy bed. *Ah, so it was all a dream after all.* She breathed a sigh of relief. The murder of her parents, being sent off to the orphanage, the slings and arrows of so much hate and malice, on the verge of being cruelly executed—*only a dream.*

“You awake?” a frosty voice said.

Shoukei sat up. The lady’s maid sitting next to the bed glared at her. Shoukei thought, *What’s this wench doing in my private chambers?*

As she mulled it over, the lady’s maid got up and left the room. Shoukei finally noticed the differences between her room at Youshun Palace and the room she was in. And her clothes—she was wearing a short-sleeved cotton singlet, its hem lengthened with a mismatched patchwork of fabrics.

Anxiety welled up in her heart. Glancing around the room, she saw folded on the table a plain blouse and skirt made of stiff, rough wool, a cotton smock and a wool jacket.

“Where am I?”

Still wearing only the singlet, Shoukei stepped down from the bed stand and wandered around the room.

This isn’t a dream. That guardsman rescue me in the nick of time.

Shoukei didn’t know if that was something she should be grateful for or not. The bedroom door opened. A man was shown into the room by the lady’s maid.

Shoukei froze on the spot. “Gekkei.”

A thin smile came to the man’s lips. “Get dressed.”

Shoukei rushed back to the bed stand, mortified to have been seen in the threadbare singlet. She hastily donned the blouse and skirt, flushing with shame at the shabbiness of the blouse and skirt.

"Your thanks are in order to Gobo. She traveled all through the day and night to get to the palace and let us know what was going on."

Gekkei's voice filtered through the curtains of the big canopy bed. Shoukei arranged the outfit as best she could. *Gobo?* She grimaced. What was with that woman? She'd made her life hell and then turned around and kissed up to Gekkei like an angel. Be thankful to a creature like that?

With all the intestinal fortitude she could muster, she emerged from the canopy bed and stepped down from the bed stand, holding her head high. Gekkei leaned back against the big table, folded his arms and looked her over.

"I never thought we'd meet again, but unfortunately it became necessary."

"Satisfied are you? Happy to see me reduced to such a degenerate state?"

"You are quite the dreadful sight."

Shoukei felt the blood rush to her cheeks. Her impoverished appearance next to the silk-clad Gekkei. Her bony, sunburnt body. As it was winter, she hadn't bathed in ages.

"You did this to me." Shoukei said, her words suffused with anger.

"You mean, dressed you in rags and sent you to work?" Gekkei smirked. "How easy it must have been to adorn yourself with silk and jewels and be praised for your beauty. What girl would not think herself elegant with servants at her beck and call, and summers spent frolicking in the shade of the trees? The great majority of the people wear what you call rags and work the land by the sweat of their brows. What is ugly is your contempt for their humble lives."

"And where are we now, Gekkei?" Shoukei spat back at him. "In your palace, with you dressed in silk, toying with the powers of the government, indulging your prurient little games. Is it fun playing emperor?"

Gekkei grinned. "I can hardly think of how to reply to such a question."

"You're the traitor who killed the emperor and stole the throne."

"That as well I see no need to deny. It is certainly correct on its face." He turned his gaze on her. "Evidently, allowing the princess royal to reside in Hou will only cause more chaos. It's probably best that you left."

"You mean, banish me? You've already removed my name from the Registry of Wizards and forced me to live in rags in a shack in the sticks. Now you make me an exile?"

"Considering the weighty matters of state before us, do you really think that amounts to much?"

In the face of his clear contempt, Shoukei could do little more than wring her hands. "You can't be serious!"

"I know that the Kingdom of Hou faces certain decline. From this point forward, things will only get worse. What you call *rags*, what you call *the sticks*, they will seem like luxuries."

"You're the one who killed the emperor!"

"And that I do not apologize for," Gekkei continued coldly. "If Chuutatsu's despotism had been allowed to continue, the greater part of the people would have been lost as well. At any rate, he was fated to fall. But while we waited for Heaven to sanction him, things may well have become so chaotic as to prevent the kingdom from ever returning to its former glory. What we did was necessarily to keep the damage to a minimum."

"Then you ought to ascend the mountain and ascertain the Divine Will. Ask whether you, the regicide, should become king. The Divine Will was certainly not with you when you murdered the king. Were I you, I would take care not to be struck by a passing thunderbolt."

"Again, I see no need to contradict you." Gekkei smiled sardonically. "I have requested that you be taken to the Kingdom of Kyou. The Imperial Kyou has kindly agreed to take the princess royal into custody."

He turned to leave. Shoukei shouted at him, "Why don't you kill me? Cut off my head with the same sword you killed my father with!"

"Because I choose not to," said Gekkei, heading for the door.

"It's all because you wanted to be emperor!" Shoukei fumed. "Because you were jealous of him! And now everybody, including you, you all hate me because you're envious of me! Because I'm the princess royal! Isn't that right?"

Gekkei didn't answer. He left without a look back. The door shut behind him. Shoukei stared at the closed door, and then buried her face in her hands.

Gekkei returned to the Gaiden from the inner palace. He'd hidden Shoukei in the depths of the palace. He knew that even among the ministers there were those who deeply resented her existence and would try to kill her if they had the chance.

You ought to ascend the mountain and ascertain the Divine Will.

Her words stabbed him to the core. He knew well enough that he had rejected the Divine Will, but there was no regretting it now. He stopped at a window just outside the Gaiden and looked southeast over the Sea of Clouds, toward the Five Sacred Mountains at the center of the world. There, the kirin who would choose the next emperor was being born.

In two or three years, the word would come from Mt. Hou and the yellow standards would be raised over every Rishi in the country. There was a kirin on Mt. Hou and the emperor would be chosen. Those so possessed would ascend the mountain and express their desire for the throne. Gekkei knew he would not be one of them.

The cruel laws had been followed by slaughter after slaughter. News spread of the failing health of the kirin. Despite the likelihood of it being the *shitsudou*, the desperate Chuatatsu set about enacting even harsher statutes. If it was the *shitsudou* and the kirin was destroyed by it, it would take several months to a year for the kirin to die. And even after the kirin died, it would take several months to a year for the emperor to be overcome as well. In that space of time, there was no telling what horrors he would wreak upon the people. Gekkei had no choice but expedite matters. Doing so must to some degree be in keeping with the Divine Will.

He would deliver a worthy kingdom to the next emperor. Until that day, the Mandate of Heaven had fallen upon his shoulders. His mandate from this day forward was to fight against the inevitable ruin of the kingdom.

He turned to the southeast, toward Mt. Hou, and bowed his head.

Gobo heard the lady's maid approaching the room and raised her head.

She'd borrowed a horse from the stables at the town hall and galloped day and night through the snow. She'd made it in time. The provincial guard was sent to rescue Shoukei. As she rested at the palace, Gobo waited for the judgment that was sure to come. She had confessed to figuring out that the girl entrusted to her was the princess royal, confessed to torturing her with this knowledge. As a consequence, she had betrayed Shoukei's identity to the townspeople.

Gekkei stepped into the room. Gobo knelt and bowed low before him.

"Please, as you were."

Gobo looked up at Gekkei's serene face. Gekkei said, "The princess royal will be leaving Hou. I cannot tell you where but she will never return to Hou again."

Of course, Gobo nodded, staring down at the ground. Of course he'd let the girl off with a slap on the wrists. She'd been hoping for Gekkei to regret the fact that he hadn't punished Shoukei severely enough and would be thrashing her on her behalf.

"You'll be dismissed from your position as headmistress and superintendent."

"I know that."

"For the time being, the townspeople will not be well disposed toward you. I've arranged for you to be relocated."

"Thank you, but I do not think it necessary."

Gekkei examined Gobo's upturned face. "You demonstrated a remarkable concern for the girl's fate. So why did you persecute her so severely?"

"I couldn't forgive her." Gobo averted her gaze. "Chuutatsu murdered my son. I knew that it could never make up for everything I felt, but whenever I saw her, I couldn't help but take it out on her. I'd get so angry I'd lose control of myself. *She* was the one who told me. She said she was the princess royal, said she didn't know anything of what her father did. I couldn't forgive that."

"I see," said Gekkei.

"The princess royal has responsibilities of her own to own up to, to live up to. To simply cast the past aside and beg shamelessly for mercy, that is unforgivable. She never did what she was supposed to. Around here, forget to tend to the

livestock and people go hungry. She never pulled her own weight. She'd come right out and tell you she hadn't done her part and expect you to feel all sorry for her because of how hard it was. I thought to myself, why should I let her get away with this?"

"Of course."

"That girl doesn't understand her guilt in all this. She still doesn't think she has anything to apologize for. Even seeing her parents killed in front of her, she still thinks it's all about *her*, about *her* suffering, about *her* pain. A lot of people suffered the same, but she won't admit that any of it came about because *she* didn't do the right thing when she was supposed to."

"I understand how you feel, but you can't make another person feel your pain. I think we'd all be better off forgetting about Chuutatsu. Leave the past in the past. Don't you agree?"

Gobo nodded.

"I'm pleased you had the presence of mind to let me know what was going on. What you did constituted no crime against the townspeople. For now, though, they will bear you no little malice. So in their stead, let me offer you my sincere thanks."

Gobo bowed her head. The tears that had run dry the day her child had died welled up and spilled onto the floor.

Chapter 18

[4-2] “I believe this is the first time we’ve met.”

Empress Kouko nodded to the woman entering the room. Ten days had passed since the young girl had collapsed at the gates to the Hall of Government. During that time, Kouko had met often with Suzu, and had sent orders to the relevant ministries requesting more information about this Riyou, mistress of Suibi Manor.

Riyou haughtily raised her head. With barely a “Hello,” she strode to the large table, pulled out a chair and sat down. “I haven’t been to the palace for a long time.”

At first glance, seeing the young Riyou together with the grandmotherly Kouko, few would conclude that the former was older than the latter. In fact, Riyou was twice the age of the empress.

“Feels like old times almost. Hardly a thing has changed.”

“I have given shelter to a girl by the name of Suzu. Apparently, she has been living at Suibi Manor.”

This brought an ingratiating grin to Riyou’s lips. “For which I am grateful. Quite useless as a maid, but I do consider her a member of the family.”

Kouko sighed to herself.

Riyou said, “And just what has she been telling you? Does the Imperial Sai actually believe her? Servants never hold their master in high regard. I certainly wouldn’t take anything she said at face value.”

“Suzu swears that you tried to kill her.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Riyou laughed. “I certainly wouldn’t on purpose. If I got tired of having her around, I’d just kick her out and be done with it. To tell the truth, I’ve considered doing so many times. But every time, the little brat gets down on her hands and knees and begs me not to.”

“You sent her out in the middle of the night, in the middle of winter, to pick

kankin mushrooms.”

“Only because I am so generous.” Riyou laughed again. “That girl broke a vase given to me by my liege. It was only the way she could think of to thank me for forgiving her.”

Kouko knit her brows together. The emperor Riyou spoke of had lived many generations before. Fu-ou was his name. In truth, Riyou had been his concubine.

“She says you sicced your tiger on her as well.”

Riyou shrugged. “The way you say it, it sounds so dreadful. Is that what she told you? It’s dangerous picking mushrooms in the middle of the night, so I sent Setsuko along in case anything unfortunate should happen.”

“It sounds to me like you treat your servants rather badly.”

“They know full well what the job entails. If other people don’t like it, well, they should mind their own business. If my servants aren’t happy with me, they’re free to leave anytime. I don’t see the problem.”

“Even if they want to, there are still those who cannot.”

Hmph, pouted Riyou, flashing a derisive smile. “You mean, all that about not being able to understand anything once she’s removed from the Registry? What’s so hard about that? She sticks around because she’d rather put up with me than become a normal person again. If I was really such a horrible person, she would just quit and leave. Isn’t that what it comes down to?”

“Suzu is a *kaikyaku*. Not being able to communicate would be quite a hardship for her, would it not?”

Riyou looked at Kokou contemptuously, smiling as she raised her voice. “Even when she speaks the same language as the rest of us, she still doesn’t know which way is up!”

Having finally grasped the gist of Riyou’s argument, Kouko took a deep breath. “So why must you behave like this? It’s honestly the last thing I expected from the mistress of Suibi Manor.”

When Riyou belonged to Fu-ou’s inner circle, she’d helped him in many ways. When malevolent retainers took advantage of the emperor’s meek nature to

indulge their own tyrannical behavior, she upbraided them on the emperor's behalf and earned their hatred in the bargain. She scolded the emperor as well, once he began to stray from the Way, and thus fell out of his good graces.

In the end, she was exiled to Suibi Manor.

She was viewed suspiciously by those traitorous retainers but they weren't able to strip her from the Registry or otherwise punish her. She was too smart for them. But with Riyou so far removed from him, the rule of Fu-ou saw a swift decline.

"Again, why be so insolent? Are you daring me to sanction you?"

"And are you daring to interfere in the business of a *hisen* wizard?"

"It is within the imperial prerogatives. I simply have never had cause to resort to them."

Riyou got to her feet, grinning defiantly. "Suit yourself."

"Do you know the Imperial Kei?" Suzu asked Sairin, kirin of Sai. They were in the palace garden, basking in the sunlight. "Oh, sorry, I should have addressed you as Taiho."

The young girl sitting in front of her had golden hair that glittered in the sunlight. Sairin had served two rulers, but based on her outward appearance, she looked even younger than Suzu. Her features were exceedingly fine and delicate. Her true nature was that of a unicorn, and Suzu was sure that a kirin must be a beast of extraordinary refinement.

"I don't mind," she said with a smile. "You may address me however you wish."

Kouko had a reserved nature, but Sairin's disposition was even more tranquil. She wore a calm smile from daybreak to dusk.

It's like a dream, Suzu thought whenever she recalled the days spent under Riyou's lash. She asked more politely, "Does the Taiho perchance know the Imperial Kei?"

Sairin shook her head.

"You've never met her? Not in your capacity as kirin of Sai?"

"Kei not being a neighboring kingdom, and having no other reason to associate, it is unlikely that we would ever meet."

Huh, Suzu muttered to herself. Each of the Twelve Kingdoms had an emperor and a kirin. If that was their only companionship, Suzu imagined life would get very lonely.

"Are you interested in the Imperial Kei?" asked Sairin. The gilded hair spilling off her shoulders shimmered like white gold.

"We were both born in Yamato. We're both about the same age."

Ah, Sairin smiled. Suzu had heard Kouko call her "Rocking Cradle" (*Youra*). She really did have the gentle disposition of a baby content in its cradle.

"Being here all alone, I would like to meet her, even if only once and talk to her about Yamato."

"Do you miss Yamato?"

"Home is where the heart is, after all. I can't tell you how many times I cried myself to sleep wanting to go home."

"Do you so dislike it here?"

Sairin asked the question in such a dispirited tone that Suzu shook her head. "I, ah, it's not that I don't like it. It's just that I don't understand anything about this world, not even the language. Things haven't been so easy for me since I came here. I've seen a lot of hard times."

"I see."

"But I would think the Imperial Kei has the same problems. Because we're both kaikyaku, I think we would understand each other. We both know what it feels like." Suzu flushed a bit explaining this.

"So you're saying you'd like to become friends with her?"

Suzu suddenly raised her head. "I suppose . . . if it's possible."

"Perhaps the Imperial Kei isn't homesick for Yamato. That is possible, don't you think?"

Suzu's voice grew more resolute. "Well, of course that's what a person from

this world would think.”

Sairin turned toward her in response. “There are many people here, too, who have been separated from their homes, such as itinerants who are not welcome anywhere, who spend their lives wandering from place to place.”

She bowed her slender neck, as if in shame at the very thought. “But I do wonder if being born in the same Yamato necessarily means you would understand each other. There are people born in the same country who hate each other nonetheless.”

Suzu said to Sairin with an annoyed scowl, “It’s not the same thing. A person born here wouldn’t understand. There’s a big difference between simply coming from the same hometown and never being able to return to your hometown again.”

“But I wonder.”

Sairin let out a small sigh. Suzu was about to shoot her another peevish look when Kouko came in from the main hall.

“Oh, there you are.” She turned to Sairin. “I’d like to talk with Suzu for a minute.”

“Yes,” said Sairin, and with a polite bow returned to main residence.

Kouko sat down next to Suzu, who immediately straightened her posture.

“I had a talk with Mistress Riyou.”

Suzu’s body began to tremble. Hearing Riyou’s name was like stumbling across something filthy in this peaceful, exquisite palace garden.

“I’ve decided to recall the servants at Suibi Manor to the palace.”

Suzu felt her cheeks flush. Not ever returning to Suibi Manor was fine with her. Instead, she would live in this beautiful palace, surrounded by kind, graceful people like Kouko and Sairin (her little spat of unpleasantness all but forgotten for now). Her spirits soared upwards.

The next words out of Kouko’s mouth turned her to ice. “However, you shan’t be one of them.”

The trembling rose from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head. “What—what do you mean?”

“Your name will remain upon the Registry. But I wish you to live in the real world for a while. I’ve arranged for you to be listed upon the census in the world below.”

“But why only me? What did I do?”

Kouko’s face was almost expressionless, except for a small touch of sadness. “I know that it was difficult for you, not being able to comprehend the language. But now that you can, you should be able to make a living for yourself.”

“What did Riyou tell you?” Her whole body shook, from anger or disappointment she couldn’t tell.

“This has nothing to do with her. Riyou left everything to my discretion.”

“Then why?”

Kouko averted her gaze. “I was thinking it might help if you grew up a bit first.”

“Grew up?” She’d been a prisoner of Riyou for a hundred years. What was it that a century couldn’t accomplish?

Kouko looked calmly at Suzu. “It must have been very hard for you, being thrown into a world you had never seen before and knew nothing about. And even more so because you couldn’t speak the language. However, Suzu, simply understanding the words that people *say* is not the same as comprehending what they *mean*.”

Suzu could only gape at her.

“If impertinence is actually what you are communicating, and that is why you are failing to come to an understanding, then the rest will be for naught. It is necessary that you first try to grasp what the other person *intends*, showing acceptance without first jumping to conclusions.”

“That’s not fair!”

“If it really proves too much for you to bear, then at that time you may return. But for now, I want you go down to the city and see what life is like. Even then, it won’t be too late to consider other options.”

"But why do I have to be the only one? After all this time!"

Suzu collapsed to the floor, her expectations thoroughly dashed. *And I thought they were good people. I thought they were nice. If I had to live here and serve them, who knows how bad it would get.*

They didn't know what it was like, the agony of getting swept away from her home country to a strange place where she didn't understand a thing. Growing up here, they couldn't possibly understand what she was going through.

"If there is some other course you wish to take, tell me now. If it is within my power, I'll see what I can do to help you."

What's she asking me this now for? Suzu bit her lip and raised her tear-streaked face. "I want . . . I want to see the Imperial Kei."

Kouko bent closer to her. "The Imperial Kei?"

"I want to meet her, see what she's like. She was born in Yamato like me."

Ah, Kouko said under her breath, knitting her brows.

"We're fellow countrywomen. The Imperial Kei would understand me, I know it. The Imperial Sai doesn't. Not even Sairin understands me. Nobody born in this world understands what I've gone through."

The Imperial Kei wouldn't treat her like this. She'd have heartfelt concern and sympathy for her. She'd surely help her.

While Kouko mulled it over, Suzu said, "I know the Imperial Kei is just as lonely as I am, is just as sad and homesick. People here don't feel sorry for you. Only somebody from Yamato like I am could understand how bad it's been."

"I have no acquaintance with the Imperial Kei, so I cannot accommodate your request directly. However, I can provide you with traveling expenses and papers of transit."

Suzu's face lit up.

Kouko looked down at her naive countenance with a slightly pained expression. "So go and see what comes of it. You certainly have nothing to lose from the experience."

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"There is one thing, however, that I wish you to remember," said Kouko, peering at the girl's tear-streaked face, now flushed and smiling. "When it comes to living a life, happiness is only the half of it. Suffering is the rest."

"What?"

"Happy people are not those whose lives are well-blessed. Happy people are those who keep their hearts in good cheer."

Suzu couldn't figure out for the life of her why Kouko was telling her this.

"Child of Yamato, in the end, the only thing that truly brings us happiness is the effort we expend to put suffering behind us and the effort we make to become happy."

Suzu nodded. "Sure. Okay."

Well, of course. She had fought hard for her happiness and the result was being freed from Riyuu. Now she was going to meet the Imperial Kei.

"I won't let adversity defeat me," she said with a smile. "I've gotten used to hardships. I've got enough patience to endure to the end."

Kouko looked away, her face tinged with sorrow.

Chapter 19

[4-3] Along with the *Koushi* and other upcoming festivals of the midwinter solstice, a giddy atmosphere once again enveloped Kinpa Palace. At the height of the celebrations, an incident shook the capital. A large cache of weapons was discovered at the home of Taisai, head of the Ministry of Heaven.

“Weapons?”

The report was delivered in the middle of the night by Daishikou, the head of the Ministry of Fall. Youko stood there dumbstruck.

“It appears as if preparations were being made for a coup.”

They’d been stockpiling weapons with the intent of assassinating *her*, the empress.

“We were informed by a number of Taisai’s retainers, who rushed to the Ministry of Fall to warn us. Not believing it ourselves, we retraced their steps and found the cache of weapons. We later took ten mercenaries into custody at Taisai’s villa in Gyouten.”

Undoubtedly, Taisai had shown himself to be the least satisfied with her. He often clashed with Chousai Seikyou, and it was widely rumored that Youko deferred to Seikyou at every opportunity. But that it would come down to regicide horrified her. Even knowing full well that the bureaucracy by and large did not accept her, she had no idea that they hated her enough to attempt an palace coup.

“Oh,” she said.

“We were able to arrest them before the plan could be carried out. Because the ministry Taisai heads is responsible for the operations of the palace, particularly the inner palace, officials serving Your Highness are mostly already in custody. If any of them are found to be bearing weapons and are involved in the plot, how shall we deal with them?”

Youko could do nothing more than gulp for air.

"Interrogations are being conducted as we speak. According to the investigation so far, Taisai may have involved the Sankou as well, with the backing of the marquis of Baku—I mean, Koukan."

Youko took another deep breath.

The three members of the Sankou were Taishi (Lord Privy Seal), Taifu (Minister of the Left) and Taiho (Minister of the Right). They were subordinate to Keiki, who was the principal counselor (Saiho) of all the ministers. They assisted the Saiho and advised and admonished the empress. Her education was also the province of the Sankou. In terms of rank, they were treated the same as Chousai, prime minister of the Rikkan, and the province lords.

However, they did not actually have a direct say in the political process. Consequently, they clashed often with Chousai, and like Taisai often rebuked Youko for taking Chousai's side. However, they were also a more intimate presence than Seikyou or the Rikkan.

Would the Sankou have become involved in an assassination plot?

At the palace, the Ministry of Heaven was responsible for food, shelter and clothing. Because they were so involved and helpful in her day-to-day life, the relationship had a strongly paternalistic aspect to it. To think that the head of the Ministry of Heaven and the Sankou would be plotting a *coup d'etat!*

"But the marquis of Baku . . ."

He'd resisted the pretender but had coveted the throne for himself. He had subsequently been detained in Baku Province pending reinstatement. The opinion of her retainers as to the disposition of his case was divided between the faction led by Chousai and that led by Taisai, and so remained up in the air.

"So this is how they express their dissatisfaction."

Among her retainers, the opinion was gaining strength that Koukan should be punished and any subsequent second-guessing about the matter nipped in the bud. Keiki strongly objected and Koukan had been placed under house arrest. This, then, was the result of Keiki's compassion.

"At any rate, I'd like to talk to Taisai. Bring him here."

Koukan was presently being held at the capital of Baku Province. Right now, Youko wanted to hear whatever excuses or explanations Taisai had to offer from the horse's mouth. But that was not to be.

Taisai was found dead in his cell.

Keiki came into the room as Daishikou was leaving. He asked, furrowing his brow, "Empress, Taisai is dead?"

"Reportedly a suicide."

Keiki sighed deeply. "It is said that you have been relying too much on Chousai."

Youko narrowed her eyes. "Are you saying that this is *my* fault? *My* fault that Taisai arranged this little conspiracy, *my* fault that he's dead?"

"Polarizing the loyalties of one's retainers is an open invitation to needless strife."

"Certainly when it came to this business with Koukan, I accepted Chousai's recommendation that he be dismissed. Are you saying that I should have left Koukan province lord of Baku?"

"No."

"Koukan blamed his dismissal on me and cooked up this plot with Taisai and the Sankou. Is that my fault, too?"

"Empress . . ."

"There are those of my retainers who would be pleased to see an end to Koukan. The prevailing opinion apparently is that I should cut to the chase and save the regrets for later. So tell me, who opposed it? So Koukan lives on and gets back at me by plotting this assassination. Tell me, is that my fault?"

Keiki was too taken aback to speak.

"There's no doubt that Chousai and Taisai don't see eye to eye very often. But Chousai is head of the Rikkan while Taisai is in charge of palace housekeeping. Taisai rose to the post from head of the Ministry of Spring, in charge of rites and rituals, while Chousai came from the Ministries of Fall and Earth. As justice is the province of the Ministry of Earth, law is naturally Chousai's strong suit. What

exactly is wrong about giving his opinions preference in this regard?"

"Empress, that is not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

Keiki couldn't find the words to reply.

"This time around, Chousai is going to ask me to go ahead and sentence Koukan. I don't see that I have any grounds to disagree. Do you disagree?"

"I would ask that you listen to Koukan's version of events."

"Of course I will. I've already ordered that the Minister of Fall go and bring him here. I expect Koukan to deny everything. But we now have evidence of frequent envoys being sent under Koukan's auspices to Taisai's residence, and bearing weapons with them. What do you think I should do at a time like this?"

"When judging one's subjects, I would counsel compassion."

"And have the same thing happen all over again?"

Keiki had nothing to add to that.

Youko averted her gaze and looked out the window instead. "You and the ministers, you have a pretty low regard for me. Because I'm a woman, because I'm a *taika*. It's in every damned sigh I hear."

"Empress, I swear that is not the case."

Youko shook her head. "Chousai will say he told so. And he'll tell me to come down hard on Koukan and the Sankou. If I agree, you're not going to be happy with me. If I reject their advice, Chousai and his people won't be happy. So, what to do?"

"Empress . . ."

Youko took a breath, exhaled, and said, "Koukan and the Sankou will be disciplined. The Sankou will be dismissed from their positions and exiled along with Koukan. This cannot go unpunished. You do not condone execution, so they will not be executed. Is that okay with you?"

Keiki opened and closed his mouth without speaking.

"I understand," he answered shortly, followed by a long sigh, a sigh that spoke

volumes.

Meaning, Keiki is not happy.

Youko stared out at the dawn breaking over the Sea of Clouds. She laughed. “Shall I issue an Imperial Rescript banning sighing?”

“Empress?”

“You may get tired of breathing your little sighs, but I am *really* getting tired of hearing them.” With that, Youko waved her hand. “You may leave. I need to rest. All these meetings have left me at my wit’s end.”

As expected, Chousai Seikyou and his faction insisted that Koukan and the Sankou be sentenced to death. “You must understand that in Koukan’s case, if you show leniency now, it will only be paid back with disloyalty later on.”

She could hear the dissatisfaction in Seikyou’s voice. Some people were saying that Taisai’s attempted insurrection itself was a misunderstanding. Some people were saying he had his reasons and that these reasons should be ferreted out, that in order to prevent more grief down the road the source of the problem should be addressed. And some people were saying that when it came to sentencing, she should show compassion first.

What all these people had in common was their opposition to Seikyou. The Imperial Court was divided into a pro-Seikyou faction and an anti-Seikyou faction. If Seikyou had recommended amnesty, his opponents would just as surely have asked for the sword.

Youko never imagined that governing a country would be an easy thing. But she’d never imagined difficulties like these. No matter what she said, her supposed subordinates would sigh their implicit criticisms. And now she had retainers for whom sighing wasn’t enough and were compelled to take up arms.

She understood nothing of this world, had no other recourse than to pay close attention to what her advisors said and scrutinize their explanations the best she could. She didn’t want to hear any more sighs. But no matter what opinion she adopted, the opposing side would be the one sighing. In the end, with both sides fighting for authority, she wasn’t going to please anyone.

Well, then, she thought, permitting herself a private sigh. She suddenly looked

up. Without really being aware of it, she had been trying to win them over. She'd become so skittish at every murmur of discontent that wasn't she now trying to psychoanalyze every glancing expression, curry their favor and generally kiss up?

She was overcome with the urge to cast aside this cloying creature she had become.

She said to Chousai, "What should I make of the fact that you were completely unaware of Taisai's scheming in the first place?"

"Taisai was not happy with me and let his temper get the best of him."

"Bearing arms against the emperor is treason. What more do you need to know about him?"

"I would like to inquire more of the officials who left Koukan to his own devices."

"And where is Koukan? The Minister of Fall has a lot to answer for, letting him get away like that."

While being escorted from Baku Province to Gyouten, Koukan had escaped. Officials from the ministry had pursued him but had not yet found him.

Enough already. Youko smiled sardonically to herself. "I understand," she said aloud. "I order that the Sankou be dismissed and along with Koukan exiled from the kingdom."

Too lenient, came the response from Seikyou's faction. *Too severe,* came the response from the opposing faction.

"And if the same thing happens again, what will Your Highness do?" queried Chousai Seikyou, looking at her.

"The conduct of the Rikkan is *your* responsibility. Treason arose from within the Rikkan under *your* watch. You will step down as Chousai and take over the Ministry of Heaven in place of Taisai."

The gathered ministers gasped. Youko laughed softly. "There are openings in the Sankou. The ministers of Spring, Fall and Earth are hereby appointed to those posts."

"Empress," said Keiki.

Youko silenced him with a look. "The remaining positions I leave to the ministers to fill at their own discretion. However, for the time being, Keiki will assume the post of Chousai."

The cries of distress arose. "This is unheard of! Giving acting authority to the Saiho!"

Youko only response was, "Consider it an Imperial Rescript!"

With that, she stepped down from the throne and left the room.

Chapter 20

[4-4] Youko retreated to her rooms deep within the Inner Palace where the ministers could not follow her. She left word with her attendants that no one was to enter but Keiki. She opened the window.

A damp breeze blew off the Sea of Clouds, bringing with it the briny smell of the ocean.

“After all that and I just slink away . . .”

She couldn’t resist a wicked smile. She’d taken Chousai down a notch and relegated the leaders of the two warring factions to the Sankou, where they could exercise no *de facto* authority. With one fell swoop, she’d wiped clean the political map of the palace. She must have been considering it all along. That’s why when she opened her mouth it just came out.

“Empress,” came Keiki’s stern voice.

Youko turned around. Keiki was wearing as grim an expression as she had hitherto observed.

“What are you doing? It has long been stipulated that the Saiho has no acting authority. That is—”

Youko cut him off. “I’m going to Kankyuu. I’m going to have the Imperial En teach me political governance.”

Keiki’s eyes widened. “What are you saying?”

“Please give my regards to the ministers.” Youko leaned back against the window frame and folded her hands in her lap. “And I thought I’d live for a while in a city.”

“What!”

Youko examined her fingernails. She left her care in the hands of her servants and they made sure her nails were always polished and beautiful. All this luxurious clothing and jewelry, it wasn’t anything she needed.

“I never wanted the throne of Kei.”

“Empress!”

“Even if I wished to be made empress, that doesn’t mean I wanted to live here amidst all this opulence. I was told the kingdom would crumble into chaos without an empress. I was told that the Divine Will reflected the will of the people. It’s hard not sleeping in your own bed at night. It’s hard going hungry. I know that down to the marrow of my bones.”

Youko had been suddenly spirited away to this strange world from Japan. Not knowing her left hand from her right, she had come very close to dying a dog’s death by the wayside.

“Getting hunted down by youma is the worst. If I hadn’t ascended to the throne, the people of Kei would have met the same fate. That’s why I accepted it. That’s why there should be an empress. Certainly not to make the bureaucrats happy and not to make *you* happy. Isn’t my reason for being here to make the people happy?”

“That is why—”

Youko shook her head. “Keiki. I don’t know the first thing about this kingdom.”

“Empress, that is—”

“What do the people think about? What do they wish and hope for? How do they live? I haven’t got a clue.”

“First finding the right path is the most important thing.”

“The right path?” Youko smiled. “There’s this girl, see. She has homework six days a week. Then there are the clubs she belongs to and cram school, besides. She practices the piano and takes lessons. Midterm exams are the worst and there are two of those every semester. Besides midterms, there are practice exams for college that could determine the rest of her life. Get too many demerits, fail too many classes, and she’ll get held back a year. Fail her entrance exams and she’ll become a so-called masterless samurai. The hem of her skirt must reach the knee, her tie must be black. Her nylons must be sheer or black. So tell me, what’s going to make this girl happy?”

“Huh?” said Keiki.

"In the society I've just described, what path should she take?"

"I am sorry, but—"

"You don't have the slightest idea, do you?" Youko said with a wry smile. "The same way you don't understand, I don't understand. What path should I take? I examine the faces of the ministers and take measure of their attitudes; I consider which opinions I should accept, which I should reject. That is all I've got to work with. That is all I know."

"But—"

"So can you give me a little time? This is all too different from the world I know."

Keiki wore an expression of utter befuddlement.

"Right now, I can't stand sitting on that throne."

Keiki's eyes opened wide with amazement.

"When I was in Yamato, I lived in constant dread of being disliked by anybody. From dawn to dusk, I constantly tried to read people's expressions, tried to stay in everybody's good graces, tried to keep my balance on that impossibly narrow tightrope. Now I'm trying to read your expression, that of the ministers, the man in the street, and then attempting to agree with everybody. It's impossible."

"Empress—"

"I don't want to repeat the same mistake twice. But I find myself headed in the same direction. Right now, I know how this will be interpreted. The ministers won't be pleased. It's because she's a woman, they'll all sigh." Youko laughed to herself. "Maybe everything will come crashing down before my very eyes. But an empress who tries to read everybody's mind, who sways back and forth like a reed in the wind, well, good riddance to such a king, and the sooner the better."

Keiki stood there, expressionless. At length, he nodded. "All right."

"For the time being, I shall leave the kingdom in your hands. I know that at the very least you won't oppress the people. If there ever comes a time when my presence is absolutely required, then send the fastest runner in the land to fetch me. Keiki, I am asking you to let me do this."

"You can count on me," Keiki said with a bow.

Youko looked at him intently, then breathed a sigh of relief. "I really am grateful. It's good to know that you understand where I'm coming from."

Keiki was the only real retainer she had. The emperor of En had many officials at his beck and call. The Imperial En was a wild man whose actions exasperated all of his ministers. But they all trusted him and he trusted them in turn. The only person capable of trusting her was Keiki. The kirin was the only person in the palace she had any real faith in.

"And what does Your Highness intend to do next, then?"

"Like I said, I was thinking of seeing what life was like in the city. Pick up work as a day laborer, live alongside regular people."

"If it meets with your approval, let me make the arrangements for your sabbatical."

Youko tilted her head to the side. "Well . . ."

"You aren't intending to live as a vagabond, are you? Permit me this. Let me make the arrangements. That will at least put my own mind at ease."

"All right. I'll leave that to you."

Now Keiki drew a breath of relief.

"I'm sorry for being so selfish."

Keiki said with a wry smile, "To tell the truth, I find myself somewhat relieved as well."

"You do?"

"At any rate, please return as quickly as possible."

"Yes, I know. I will."

Leaving the Inner Palace, Keiki stopped to look out at the Sea of Clouds. As complicated as things had just gotten, he felt strangely relieved.

Keiki had served two empresses. The posthumous name of the first was Yo. Her reign had lasted a mere six years, and she had remained shut away in the palace for most of that time. The woman had no interest whatsoever in governance or

politics.

The memory of her pale face arose from the recesses of his memory. She had a gentle, prudent nature. Except for her extreme shyness, she was not undeserving of the throne. However, what she truly desired was a rather banal sort of happiness.

More than wishing happiness for her people, the Late Empress Yo wanted a peaceful, frugal existence. She didn't care for riches, only a simple life lived without praise or censure. She only desired to be left in peace to till the land, marry a man, and raise their children.

He could still hear the sound of her working at her loom.

When she first ascended to the throne, it seemed that she would serve honorably and true. But she soon grew weary of the rivalries amongst the ministers. The officials she had inherited from the previous monarch wrangled over political turf and fought for leadership positions. As this life surrounded and closed in on her, she withdrew from it. She secluded herself deeper and deeper within the palace and there worked at her loom. It was her way of trying to undo everything he had imposed on her.

"And here I am, still thinking about her."

Keiki smiled a grim smile. The first time he met Youko, he was struck at how much she resembled Yo. She still did. In an honest moment, he would admit he found the similarities disconcerting.

"But they've turned out differently."

Even if only in small ways, Youko and Yo were different. He could tell from the way Youko battled her personal demons. Like Yo, Youko recoiled from dealing with the ministers and abhorred the throne. But Youko recognized those tendencies within herself. She had begun to take measures to overcome them. That was the biggest difference between them.

"Hankyo!" Keiki called to his *shirei*.

"Yes," came the reply from the shadows at his feet.

"Accompany the Empress and protect her. Make sure no harm befalls her. She

is the one jewel in the crown that Kei cannot afford to lose.”

Part V

Chapter 21

[5-1] The Kingdom of Kyou was located to the southeast of the Kingdom of Hou. The Kyokai separated the two kingdoms. The passage of water between Hou and Kyou was also called the Kenkai Straits, but was equally referred to as the Kyokai. After all, Kyou wasn't visible from Hou. For those who dwelled along the shores, Kyokai or Kenkai was six of one, a half dozen of the other.

Shoukei was escorted by ten flying cavalry from the Kei provincial guard. As they headed toward Kyou, she again thought of her home country. Sea traffic continued between the two kingdoms, but the crossing took three days. For the first time in her life, it struck her that, floating there in the Kyokai, Hou was itself like a winter-bound city, shut off from the rest of the world.

The species of *you*-creatures capable of flight were limited in number. As they must also conform somewhat to the disposition of a horse in order to be ridden, this restricted their kind even more. The primary *you*-creatures were striped *rokushoku* or Szechwan deer. They were definitely not lowly beasts of burden. Shoukei was allowed use of a *rokushoku*. Surrounded by the flying knights of the cavalry, she headed to Kyou.

It was an uneventful trip. On the way there, they spent a night at a city on the shores of Hou and a night at a city on the shores of Kyou. After three days, they arrived at Soufuu Palace in Renshou, the capital of Kyou.

The Imperial Kyou, empress of Soufuu Palace, had ruled for ninety years. Shoukei didn't know anything more about her than that. Hou had not enjoyed productive diplomatic relations with other kingdoms. On the occasion of her father Chuutatsu's coronation, envoys from Ryuu, Kyou and Han, the three nearest kingdoms, had come bearing congratulations. But from the start he rarely discoursed with the rulers of other kingdoms.

Shoukei and her escorts were shown by the palace officials into the Gaiden. Passing through the gates, Shoukei cast a painful look at the resplendent

buildings.

I've got no reason to be a shrinking violet now.

She had lived in the Imperial Palace. Even reminding herself of this fact, she felt herself shrink. Part of it was being in the palace of a foreign potentate. The other part was, as always, shame at her slovenly appearance.

The officials who greeted them and accompanied them into the palace regarded Shoukei suspiciously. She hung her head, knowing she undoubtedly looked like some lost flower girl from the wrong side of town.

No, she thought as they walked down the polished black granite hallways, she was more wretched than any other flower girl of Kyou. Kyou was a wealthier country than Hou. She could tell that by what she had seen so far of Soufuu Palace. The city was beautifully arrayed. Hoso, the capital of Hou, looked like a one horse town in comparison.

Entering the Gaiden, she felt too miserable to raise her head. After shooting her a look, the envoy with her knelt down and proceeded forward on his knees, bowing low with his head touching the floor. Shoukei took his glance to mean that she was to do the same. Kowtowing like this only made her feel more miserable. It wasn't right that she had to humble herself like this. It should be enough to kneel. She was the princess royal, after all.

The envoy ceremoniously unfurled the decree from Gekkei and proclaimed his greeting. "The marquis of Kei, together with all his retainers, humbly and with gratitude thanks the Imperial Kyou for her great generosity in taking into custody the person of the princess royal."

Somebody chuckled. *The Imperial Kyou*, Shoukei realized, catching her breath.

"Oh, it was nothing," she said. "We're neighbors, after all."

Shoukei opened her eyes and looked down at the floor. It was the voice of a young woman.

"But enough of that. How is Hou doing these days?"

"As well as can be expected." The envoy again touched his head to the floor.

"Well, from my perspective, sitting upon the throne by right of the Mandate of

Heaven, I'd say the marquis of Kei is in a rather bad spot. But I'm sure you know that better than I do. I cannot thank you enough for all your good offices."

The echoes of her young voice rang out like a bell.

"Please congratulate the marquis on his decisive action. The emperor was the cause of his own ruin. To escape his wrath, many refugees fled to Kyou in small boats and clinging to rafts. The people of Hou must be breathing sighs of relief."

Shoukei almost raised her head at that point. To imagine that some mere slip of a girl would say that to her face . . .

It would be a grave breach of etiquette to raise her head without permission. That wasn't the only thing that restrained her. Shoukei didn't want to see the Imperial Kyou. Shoukei could tell from her voice that she was a young woman, perhaps the same age as herself. She didn't want to see her, a girl clothed in silk, adorned with jewels, sitting on the throne.

"I take it this is Son Shou."

Hearing her formal family name so casually spoken by the Imperial Kyou, Shoukei bit her lip and fumed. That glib use of her name alone spoke volumes.

"Yes, it is."

"I shall take Son Shou into my custody. You needn't concern yourself about her any longer. The people of Hou and the ministers of Hou can forget all about her."

Understood, said the envoy's bow.

"Please tell the marquis of Kei to put the emperor behind him and work for the good of the realm, and by doing so atone for his sins. A kingdom without an emperor can sink into the depths with alarming speed. That is the best way of keeping the ship of state afloat."

"I shall inform him thusly."

"Does the marquis still reside at the provincial capital? He should take possession of the imperial throne as soon as possible. I believe it best that he assume the throne until the coronation of the next emperor and work on behalf of all the people. I will send along letters making note of the same. If any profess dissatisfaction with this course of events, let it be said that it was done according

to the recommendation of the Imperial Kyou."

Outraged, Shoukei raised her head. She couldn't stop herself. "Gekkei is a traitor and regicide!"

Their eyes met. The empress sitting on the throne looked no older than twelve. She had the face of an angel. Standing behind her was a man with golden hair closer to a shade of copper. Kyouki, the kirin of Kyou.

The girl's coral lips parted. "The emperor destroyed himself," she said dismissively. "No emperor is killed except as the consequence of his crimes." She returned her attention to the envoy. "Sir, hasten back to Hou and give whatever assistance you can to the marquis."

The envoy bowed deeply. With a voice filled with emotion, he thanked the Court and withdrew, leaving Shoukei behind. Shoukei continued to stare up at her.

The empress said, "Once you are registered upon the census, would you prefer to live in the city or serve in the palace as a maid servant?"

The blood rushed to Shoukei's cheeks. A maid servant, a working servant, not even rising to the rank of a lowly clerk, not even listed upon the Registry! This child was asking her, the princess royal, if she wanted to be a *maid servant*.

Seeing the expression on her face, the girl giggled. "She still has her pride, if nothing else. Yet I am not so compassionate as the marquis. Go to a orphanage or become a maid servant. Take your pick. You will reside at the orphanage until you reach the age of your majority, but as you are not a citizen of Kyou, you will not receive a partition. You'll have to find yourself a job. Well?"

"You're mean."

"And I don't much care for you, either." She grinned. "We took custody of you because your continuing presence in Hou would only cause more harm. Pity for you had nothing to do with it, and don't forget it. So, which will it be?"

Shoukei couldn't imagine being at the beck and call of this girl. But her memories pushed those feelings aside. Ending every day covered with dirt, working until she could barely move, sleeping in a drafty shack. Everything she had experienced in Hou now mitigated her feelings of outrage.

“I’ll be a maidservant.”

The girl chortled. “In that case, the first thing you need to learn is to prostrate yourself properly before the empress. And never to raise your head and speak until and unless you are spoken to.”

The empress was about to return to the Naiden when the man behind her opened his mouth to speak. Shushou looked over her shoulder at him.

“What was that?”

He said, a flustered look on his face. “The way you dealt with the princess royal—”

“Oh, nonsense,” Shushou said flippantly. “Before you start feeling sorry for Shoukei, first feel sorry for the people of Hou who have so much cause to hate her. Really, you kirin do let your sense of compassion get the best of you, putting the cart before the horse and all.”

“But—”

Shushou laughed. She peered at face of Kyouki high above her. While most kirin had a willowy physiognomy, the kirin of Kyou was a big man.

“I have made up my mind. Okay?”

“Yes, but isn’t it the Empress’s duty to show compassion toward her subjects?”

Shushou snorted. “When I became empress, becoming a great humanitarian wasn’t part of the deal. Sorry. Besides, you are my servant, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then don’t nitpick so. I don’t want to hear any more about this Shoukei business. Governing the kingdom is hard enough. I haven’t got any sympathy for some little fool who fiddled while her kingdom burned and utterly lacks any discernment when it comes to her father.”

Disheartened, the big man hung his head and continued to mope. “But that you would even consider recommending that the marquis of Kei usurp the throne—”

"Didn't think to. Recommended." Shushou plopped herself down in a chair. "So you're saying that because the marquis of Kei killed the emperor, he shouldn't be the one to rule the country? Frankly, I wish the man would show a little backbone and just call himself emperor."

"It is Heaven who crowns the emperor. It's that throne you are recommending be usurped. If that comes to pass, and because of it Hou is destroyed—"

Shushou rested her chin in her hands and sighed. "I really don't know what to do. Wave after wave of refugees from Hou."

"You should think about the refugees first."

Shushou poked her finger at Kyouki. "You are such a dunce! Isn't there any room in that head of yours to consider anything other than pity? Hou *is* in chaos. And you're saying you don't want the marquis to take charge and shore up the kingdom? Hou doesn't have a kirin, you know."

Kyouki glanced anxiously around the room. "Empress—"

"Don't worry, nobody's here. Of course I wasn't going to tell that to the envoy. I'm not stupid. There's no kirin on Mt. Hou. Who knows how long it will take for a new emperor to ascend to the throne. If the people of Hou knew that, they would lose hope and the kingdom would collapse before our eyes."

There was no kirin on Mt. Hou to choose the new king. Not even Shushou knew why not. The wizardesses of Mt. Hou were the servants of God and Mt. Hou was the inviolable sanctuary of all the kings of the Twelve Kingdoms, yet no further details of the incident had been forthcoming. Three years before, an anomaly had passed through Kyou in the direction of Hou. A *shoku*. It was possible that this shoku had originated in the Five Sacred Mountains. When inquiries were made as to whether this was the case, it was said that all the palaces on Mt. Hou remained shut. None were open in order to welcome a new kirin.

When asked if Houki—the kirin of Hou was reportedly a boy—was well and strong, not even a vague prevarication was heard in reply. Further investigation confirmed it. There was no kirin on Mt. Hou.

Shushou let out a breath. "We've got no choice but to let the marquis get on

with it. He's got a good head on his shoulders. And we don't know when a kirin will show up in Hou and chose a new king. That's why I'm trying to spur things on. You got a problem with that?"

"Empress—"

Shushou swung her feet back and forth. One of her shoes flew off. She said, "Chuutatsu brought this all upon us. It's not only his fault, but the fault of all his blockhead retainers and hangers-on who let it happen. That's why I can't stand Shoukei. Even you should be able to understand that. Now, quit crying me a river and get me my shoe and put it back on for me."

Chapter 22

[5-2] “It’s freezing cold.”

Rangyoku’s voice carried in the morning air.

The Eastern Kingdom of Kei, the city of Kokei, prefecture of Hokui, Ei Province. Kokei was located to the northwest of the capital Gyouten, located in the center of Ei Province. The road east from Gyouten reached to the Kyokai. The road west ran to the Blue Sea. From ancient times, the thriving city of Kokei, prefectoral capital of Hokui, had sat at the crossroads on the road west. Consequently, the city also came to be known as Hokui.

The village was the nucleus of the city that had grown up around it. In this, Kokei was not exceptional. However, the city associated with the village had greatly expanded over the years, displacing the village of Kokei from its prime location on the highway. As a result, the village was attached like a small appendage to the northeast of the big city. The sign over the gates read “Kokei,” but no one called it that anymore. The name of the city was Hokui, and the small bump of a town connected to it was called Kokei.

On a quiet block in a corner of Kokei, Rangyoku filled a bucket with water. Glancing around her, she could see the cold and desolate mountains rising above the high walls. Pale white frost clung to the tops of the leafless trees. The gathering clouds were heavy with precipitation.

“I wonder if it’ll snow,” she said to herself, and went back into the house through the rear entrance. The house was the orphanage. Rangyoku had no parents so she’d be given over to the care of the rike.

“You’re up early, Rangyoku.”

The old man lifted his head when Rangyoku came into the kitchen. He was putting coals into a brazier in the middle of the dirt floor. His name was Enho and he was the headmaster of the orphanage.

“Morning.”

“You’re a good girl, out of bed before an old’un like me. I thought for once I’d

be the first one up and get everything ready. Seems I'm not quite there yet."

Rangyoku laughed and emptied the bucket into the tank. She liked the headmaster. She would have expected an older man like Enho to get up before her. But she knew he worried that if he got up early, everybody else would feel obligated to get up early too. So he stayed in bed a while longer.

"Looks like snow."

"Sure does. The water was freezing cold. Come over here and get yourself warmed up."

"I'm okay," she smiled.

She lifted up the lid on the big pot sitting on the stove. Warm steam filled the room. She started to prepare breakfast. Enho put the brazier down next to the water tank. He was only thinking of her. She stirred some leftover vegetables and meat into the simmering water, along with some dumplings.

"We're getting a new child today."

Rangyoku looked back over her shoulder and Enho nodded. He meant that the rike would be taking on another orphan.

"Should I set a place for breakfast?"

"More likely this afternoon or toward evening."

"I see."

When she and Keikei had fled the city, the headmistress of the rike had been a short-tempered old woman. When they returned, the old woman had died and had been replaced. Enho was not originally from the town. She'd been quite nervous hearing that a strange old man had become headmaster, but now she was quite thankful.

"G'morning." Keikei ran into the kitchen.

"Hey, Keikei, you're up early."

"The cold woke me up."

Rangyoku laughed as her brother stamped his little feet. She filled a bucket for him. Enho dropped a hot rock into the water. That plop and sizzle was the sound

of winter.

"Now, wash your face and dump the water outside."

"Alrighty," Keikei said with a nod and plunged his face into the water.

Rangyoku watched him smiling. There were three other children at the orphanage, but they got up later. Since Enho never scolded them, they stayed in bed as long as they wished. The three had been living at the orphanage for a long time. Because the previous headmistress had been so strict, they took advantage of Enho a bit. Perhaps aware of it himself, Enho let them.

"Man, it's cold!" said Keikei, opening the back door and tossing the water out onto the snow. His breath puffed white in the cold air.

"Better than last year, though. There's not much snow."

Half a year had passed since the coronation of the new empress. Just as the old-timers promised, the natural disasters had mostly ceased. Last year had seen an unusual amount of snow and many of the snowed-in villages had died off.

"I wish it would snow."

The braziers were the main source of heat. On really cold days, they put a kettle on the stove and boiled water and everybody gathered around the stove and warmed themselves with the steam and body heat. Wealthy homes had fireplaces, and even wealthier homes had a system that passed hot air between the walls and under the floorboards, heating each room individually. But few families in Kei could afford it.

Few could afford even to glaze their windows with glass. Instead, the windows were shuttered and paper affixed across the inside of the frame. That would let in some sunlight while shutting out the wind. Cotton was such a precious commodity that the futons were padded with the straw collected in the fall. As for winter clothing, it was practically impossible to get hold of fur or pelts. Charcoal for the brazier wasn't cheap, so the house was cold all the time.

Kingdoms to the north of Kei were colder, but as Kei was so much poorer it had fewer means to combat the cold. Winter in the northern quarter of Kei was particularly hard.

Nevertheless, Rangyoku liked the winter. Not only Rangyoku, so did all the children at the orphanage. Normally, from spring until fall, the people decamped to a nearby villages and hamlets, leaving the towns pretty much deserted. Only the orphans and town elders were left behind. During the winter, they all returned and would get together in big groups to spin cotton and weave baskets. That was a lot more fun.

Rangyoku took the lid off the big pot. "Keikei," she said, "go wake everybody up. It's time for breakfast."

Rangyoku was slicing steamed *mochi* into a bowl when she heard a scream from the courtyard. Taken aback, she looked around as Keikei came running back from the detached wing of the orphanage.

"Sis!"

"What's going on?"

It wasn't Keikei who had screamed. But then came another cry.

"*Youma!*"

Enho jumped to his feet. Rangyoku put both hands to her mouth and swallowed her own scream.

"Go out the back and get to the Rishi." Enho gave the gasping Keikei a push. "Run for the cover of the riboku tree and stay there! You understand?"

"You, too, Gramps."

"I'll be along soon. Wait for me there."

Enho nodded his head at Rangyoku, urging her to go on ahead. Rangyoku bowed in turn, grabbed Keikei's hand, pushed open the back door and was about to stumble out when she heard the rustling of feathers and the sound of strong wings flapping.

She instantly stepped back and slammed the door shut. For a brief moment, she caught a glance of the sweep of its wings and the form of a tiger alighting on the ground. A *kyuuki*.

"Rangyoku?" Leaving the kitchen, Enho had turned back in the direction of her cry.

"In the back—there's a kyuuki in the back yard!"

Keikei began to wail. A kyuuki was a fierce, man-eating youma. It meant the end of the town. A kyuuki would devour every last person in sight.

Even now, the kingdom was still in this much chaos.

The back door reverberated with a crash. Rangyoku jumped back. She grabbed Keikei. Enho put his arms around them and hustled them into the main hall. Splinters came flying as the kyuuki tore through the wooden door with its claws. They bolted the door to the main hall and ran into the courtyard. They had to get to the Rishi. No youma would attack them beneath the riboku.

They rushed down the corridor toward the inner gate, down the stone steps, and emerged into the front yard. Behind them the screams of the children continued.

She wanted to help them but couldn't think of a way how. She knew it was inhuman to abandon them like this. She knew if it were Keikei back there, she would have turned back, even if it meant sacrificing herself.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

They reached the eaves of the main gate to the orphanage. Keikei shouted. Rangyoku turned and followed his gaze. Her eyes flew to the roof of the inner gate, to the crouching form of the kyuuki.

"Get going!" Enho urged them forward. "Run to the Rishi and don't look back!"

"No," said Keikei, clinging to Enho's coat.

"The others, they're probably already dead!"

"Gramps!"

Rangyoku took Keikei's hand in hers. She'd at least save him. She'd abandon Enho, use herself as a shield, and at least save him. The kyuuki licked its chops, crouched down low. Rangyoku watched it launch itself into the sky and fall on them. Transfixed, she held Keikei's hand.

A bright splash of red shot past them, grazing the creature's muzzle.

"What?"

That shock of red was a mane of red hair. Somebody had rushed past them and up to the youma. The image frozen in her eyes as she turned was that of the flutter of crimson and the brilliant flash of a naked sword cutting an arc in the air.

A boy, and a not very big one at that. His silhouette and that of the pouncing kyuuki merged together. Rangyoku hugged her brother to her chest.

The claws and fangs of the kyuuki, limbs as fat as logs. It's entire body was a weapon, yet the sword danced as it nimbly slashed at the youma. The spray of blood and gore belonged to the youma. The sword severed the steel-clawed limbs from its body. The youma slumped, howling, until the tip of the sword pierced its throat. The boy drew out the sword, swung it around and down. The blade bit deeply into the kyuuki's thick neck.

The kyuuki shuddered and toppled over. The boy jumped back and out of the way and then without a second thought, ran forward again and delivered the second blow to the beast's neck. Gripping the hilt with both hands, coming down on one knee, in a single blow cutting off the kyuuki's head.

Rangyoku fell to her knees. "*I don't believe it.*" It was impossible, felling a kyuuki like that. She closed her eyes briefly, only time enough to scream. She sat down on the ground, Keikei still in her arms. The boy wiped the blade clean and looked back at them.

"You okay?"

She couldn't answer, could only nod her head, yes.

Mouth agape, Enho finally put down the hand he had raised to hold them back. "And you are, sir?"

Before he finished asking the question, Keikei shouted, "Look out behind you!"

In a flash, the boy spun around, in the same split second drawing the sword as another kyuuki leapt down from the inner gate, throwing its entire weight against him. He feinted and ducked the charge. The kyuuki's bloodstained fangs closed on empty air. The sword connected, a mortal blow to the back of its head, and then plunged in between its shoulders. He drew out the sword, in the movement twisting his body and thrusting backwards, impaling it through

throat.

Again, he made short work of it.

The sword was buried in the kyuuki's neck. Yanking it out, the boy tottered backwards in a manner Rangyoku found strangely affecting. He was so small compared to the kyuuki.

"Wow! Wow!" Keikei let go of his sister's hand and jumped to his feet.

Again, the boy wiped down the blade and glanced back at them. "It looks like you're not injured."

"Yeah. You were so great!" Keikei grinned happily.

The boy turned toward the heart of the compound. "I heard screaming."

Enho staggered up to him. "The other children—"

Not waiting to hear the rest, and without a second thought for the kyuuki, the boy leapt over the carcass and ran into the grounds of the orphanage.

Rangyoku and Keikei and Enho hastily followed after him, coming upon the ravaged exterior wing of the orphanage. Not a breath of life was left in the place. Three children between the ages of seven and fifteen lived there. They had lived together as a family until today.

The big window gaped open. The door hung from its hinges. A frigid wind blew into the quiet, cold room. Every surface was splattered with blood so fresh and acrid it almost seemed strange that no steam rose from the bodies.

They laid the three bodies out in the courtyard and covered them with mats of reeds. Hearing the commotion, the townspeople flocked to the orphanage, lending their assistance and sharing their grief and they bore the bodies to the town hall. By that time, news of the incident had reached the neighboring communities, and the center of town was crowded with unfamiliar faces.

Rangyoku looked at the spectators surrounding the orphanage, all keeping their distance, then at the boy. He stood in the courtyard, holding the sword in one hand, watching as the dead were born off. He had crimson hair and dark green eyes. His skin, bronzed by the sun, had a vibrant quality to it. He was wearing a short, plain coat. But the sword he'd killed the kyuuki with was

magnificent.

"Um . . ." she said. "Thank you for saving our lives."

"It was nothing," he replied, in a quiet voice that somehow left a matter-of-fact impression on her. He seemed a little older than herself. They were both about the same height, so she guessed his age based on his overall stature.

"Are you from Hokui?" She asked, as he did not look like anyone she had seen around these parts.

"No," he answered.

Rangyoku tilted her head to one side. It being first thing in the morning, this struck her as a bit odd. The town gates opened at daybreak. In order to have gotten in so early, she reckoned he must have camped out the night before. When she asked him this, he nonchalantly nodded. "I considered seeking shelter in one of the hamlets but there was nobody there."

Who would seek shelter in the hamlets at this time of year? Then the thought occurred to her. "Are you perhaps from Kou or Sou?" She had heard that in the kingdoms further south, people stayed in the hamlets year-round.

"No, from En."

"En is a cold country this time of year. The hamlets in En would all be empty, wouldn't they?"

"Probably so."

There was a smile in his voice. She turned to see Enho returning from where he had left Keikei in the care of the neighbors.

Enho said, "A kaikyaku."

Rangyoku looked at the boy with wide eyes. Enho said, "You're Chuu Youshi, correct?"

"Yes. And you are Enho-san?"

Enho nodded and glanced at Rangyoku. "This is the child I told you about, who was sent to the orphanage. Your new roommate."

"My what? But . . ."

Rangyoku gave the boy a long look. Enho meant this was the girl her same age he'd been telling her about. "Oh! I'm sorry! I completely misunderstood!"

The girl smiled pleasantly. "No problem. I've gotten used to it."

Enho turned to Rangyoku. "Youshi, this is Rangyoku, one of the residents of the orphanage. She's the older sister of the boy you just rescued."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Youshi said with a slight bow.

When Rangyoku smiled and bowed in turn, Enho gave her a nudge. "While Youshi is changing her clothes, why don't you get Keikei? He's still in something of a panic."

"I'll do that," she replied with a nod. Enho watched her hurry off and then looked up at the girl standing next to him. "With all these people about, we never greeted you properly."

"Understood. It's fine."

"I apologize. I'll see to it that you are properly treated as a resident of the orke."

"Well, that is why I came here."

Hearing her soft voice and seeing the look in her eyes, Enho nodded. "We are very grateful to you for saving our lives."

"Do youma still come into inhabited areas like this?"

"Yes, but less often since Kei got a new empress."

Chapter 23

[5-3] Waiting for the ship to depart, Suzu leaned back against a bollard on the pier and examined her travel papers. Her passport was in the form of a small wooden token she was to carry with her during the journey.

The people of a kingdom made their living on the land partitions they were granted by the government. The kingdom in turn governed the people using the partition as the primary instrument of its control. Leaving a partition meant giving up the rights and protections granted by the government.

When a passport was issued, the name of the passport holder was inscribed on the face of the wooden token. On the back was listed the name of the issuing prefectoral office. The passport was placed on the person's *koseki*, or census record, and at three places along the edge of the token, a dagger was driven into the *koseki*. By lining up the grooves in the passport token with the puncture marks in the *koseki*, the authenticity of the passport could be confirmed.

It was not uncommon for a guarantor's name to be inscribed on the back of the passport.

With a passport in hand, even when a person left his homestead, if circumstances required it, he could seek assistance from the nearest government office. It was the same when traveling abroad. Only an itinerant or displaced person who'd given up his rights traveled abroad without a passport.

A passport was necessary even when going to a city in a neighboring jurisdiction. Consequently, if only out of habit, people carried them wherever they went.

As Suzu's passport had been issued by the Imperial Sai herself, the back was inscribed with the Imperial Seal. The passport was affixed to a small plaque called a *rakkan*, or financial guarantor. The seal burned into its face was that of the issuing bank.

The Imperial Sai Kouko had given Suzu a generous sum for traveling expenses. These funds were deposited in a bank in Yuunei, the bank that issued the *rakkan*.

Banks formed powerful trade credit unions by establishing strong and secure relationships with banks in other municipalities and even other countries. With a rakkan issued by a bank in the trade credit union, money could be withdrawn or a line of credit established at any other bank in that trade credit union anywhere in the world.

On the rakkan, the issuing bank and the stated credit limit were written in coded characters that could not be read by anybody outside the trade credit union.

“Unbelievable,” Suzu muttered to herself. She carefully replaced her travel papers inside her jacket pocket, and secured it further with cord running through her belt.

It was too bad she wouldn’t be working at the palace. However things seemed to be moving in the right direction now. Kouko arranged for the cavalry to fly her to the port of Eisou on the Kyokai. After a journey of ten days, they arrived at the coast where passage on a ship was arranged. She was asked whether she preferred a cargo or passenger ship. A passenger ship could only be booked as far as Sou. She would have to transfer several more times to get to Kei. If she went on one of the cargo vessels that plied the Kyokai around the Twelve Kingdoms, she could sail all the way to En, with a stop in Kei.

Suzu said that a cargo ship was fine with her. The agent spoke with one of the commercial outfits on her behalf. This would get her to Kei. With the endorsement of the Imperial Sai on her passport, getting a meeting with the Imperial Kei shouldn’t be too difficult.

I’m going to meet her. Somebody from Yamato like her. Definitely the only person on the planet who could really understand her.

A tan-colored flag was raised. The boat was small and there was only one flag. A small wheel was affixed to the top of the flagpole. It was a good-luck charm issued by the Ministry of Winter called a *junpuusha*. The wheel-like talisman affixed to the top of the mainmast ensured smooth sailing. As there were no deep harbors on the Kyokai, large ships did not travel these routes. Primarily cargo ships, though upon request they could take on passengers.

This takes me back.

Suzu looked down at the dark sea from the side of the boat. The ink-black sea, the faint, star-like flicker of lights. Swept away from her long-lost home, the first thing she saw of this world was this ocean. Suzu still didn't understand it. This ocean she almost drowned in, how far was it from her hometown in Japan? Told that the lights glimmering in the midst of the ocean were some kind of fish, that was good enough for her.

Glowing *you*-fish that lived deep in the ocean. They looked small to her, but in fact some were big enough to swallow a barge. Because they never surfaced except during storms, they were not considered dangerous. The *youma* that attacked people at sea were mostly beasts and birds that came from the Yellow Sea.

The boat left from a port in the south of Sai and sailed in an eastward direction across the Kyokai. They chose routes across the Kyokai rather than the Inner Seas because midway they would have to pass close by Kou. The emperor of Kou had fallen and the kingdom was in chaos.

"Usually, we don't see *youma* like that but once every three or four years," a sailor she'd gotten to know told her. "Youma are way worse than natural disasters. The Sonkai Gate up to the Reison Gate are particularly bad. They say that when sailing back to Sai from En on the Inner Seas, the flocks of *youma* from the Yellow Sea blot out the sun."

"Wow."

The Yellow Sea in the center of the world was completely closed off by the encompassing range of the Kongou Mountains. Yellow Sea was accessible only through one of four gates. The gate in the southeast quadrant was called the Reison Gate. The narrow strait between the Yellow Sea and Kou was called the Sonkai Gate.

"He must have done something bad, that Imperial Kou. He hasn't been dead but a couple of months and look at the state they're in. Must be rough for the people of Kou. Until they get themselves a new emperor, you got to wonder how much worse things will get."

"So it's really bad . . ."

The countries in this world are so strange, Suzu thought. It was one thing to

say that God created the world. But children that grew on trees and all these strange creatures—she wouldn't be surprised if God really existed. But if God existed, why did kingdoms go to pieces like that? If God existed, why did people end up as kaikyaku? And if God existed, it'd be nice if He'd help her out for once too.

The boat followed the coast of Sou east. Along the way, it stopped at three ports. The last was a small island close to Kou. From there, they passed through the straits between Kou and Shun and headed north. The water of the straits was a dark navy blue, somewhat bluer than the open sea.

"Why is the ocean a different color?" she mused as she rested her elbows on the railing and cupped her chin in her hands.

"Because it's more shallow," piped up a voice next to her.

Suzu jumped and turned toward the sound of the voice. Next to her she saw a boy stretching as he peered out at the sea. At first, Suzu had been the only passenger on the boat. After three ports of call, the number had increased to eight. He must have been one of the passengers who came on board at Bokko, the last port of call.

"Shallow?"

"Shallow seas are bluer than deep water. You don't know much about the ocean, do you?"

Suzu glared at him. "I've never lived close to the ocean before."

"Really?"

The boy let go of the railing and laughed. He looked to be twelve or so. With his freckles and hair the color of oranges, he made a cheerful impression. When he laughed, his whole face lit up.

Suzu asked, "Are you going to En or Kei?"

"Kei," he answered.

"Oh." Suzu smiled. "I'm Suzu. Pleased to meet you."

The boy cocked his head to one side. "That's a funny name."

“I’m a kaikyaku.”

“Kaikyaku?”

So there are things people here don’t know, either. “I’m from Yamato. I was washed ashore here.”

The boy’s mouth gaped open in surprise. “No kidding? That’s great!”

“It’s not great. It’s pretty awful. It means I can’t ever go home again.”

“Huh,” the boy muttered, and stretched again. He looked down into the waves. “So your luck’s not so good.”

“No.”

White waves washed the sides of the ship, vivid against the dark surface of the ocean. Shifting her gaze to the open sea, her eyes met the clear line of the horizon dividing the heavens from the water. Somewhere beyond that distant horizon was the country where she’d been born. She wept profusely when she heard she could never go back again. She knew it was possible for wizards to cross the Kyokai and had once indulged the fantasy that if she served Riyou well, she would get promoted to the class of wizard who could do so. But when she found out that she would have to become a wizard of the air and rise to the rank of count, she gave up on the idea.

“Hey, cheer up.” The boy hit Suzu on the shoulder. “There are lots of kids who can’t go home again.”

Suzu scowled at him. “No, there aren’t. There aren’t that many kaikyaku here.”

“Even if you’re not a kaikyaku. Like when your kingdom gets all messed up and your home gets burned down, there are people like that.”

“That’s different from what I’m talking about! I can’t go back to the place I was before. If your house burns down, you can build a new one. Do you know what it means never being able to return to a place you once loved? Do you have the slightest idea what you’re talking about?”

The boy looked up at Suzu with a perplexed look on his face. “I kinda think it’s the same thing.”

“You’re just a child. You don’t understand.”

The boy puffed out his cheeks. "Kid or an adult, being sad is being sad. Not going home again would hurt the same, wouldn't it? You know how sad it is not being able to ever go home, but so do a lot of people."

"I'm telling you, it's not the same thing!"

The boy sulked for a minute. "Well, then, have it your way. Go on crying your eyes out. Excuse me for butting in."

Everybody here is just the same. Nobody understands anything. She said aloud, "Brat!"

The boy didn't turn around.

"So what's your name?"

The boy tossed the answer back over his shoulder. "Seishuu."

Part VI

Chapter 24

[6-1] Rakushun's hirsute tail stood straight up. "Youko left the palace?"

Rokuta gave that sight a curious look and with the tips of his fingers motioned for him to calm down. "Mum's the word," he said, glancing around at the surrounding tables and the waiters delivering the food.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry."

Rokuta grinned and then with an annoyed expression picked up the bandana that had fallen onto the table in front of him. After covering his head with the bandana, he looked like an ordinary child again. "She took off for a while. She asked for a visa so I sent her one."

"What is going on with her?"

"Who knows?" said Rokuta, tossing a dumpling into his mouth. "All kinds of stuff. I got the feeling last time that she had a lot on her mind."

"Yeah," Rakushun muttered.

"It's because she's such a serious person. To make matters worse, everybody over there is so uptight and argumentative. You tell them to sit back and take it easy but they're just not the kind of people who can do that."

Rakushun nodded. He picked up his chopsticks again and stopped. "I was thinking of going to see how she was."

University was in recess over the New Year's holiday, the last part of December and the first part of January.

"You're being overprotective." Rokuta gave Rakushun a teasing look.

Rakushun's whiskers drooped dejectedly. "And I thought I'd take the opportunity to go see Mom."

The country of Rakushun's birth—the Kingdom of Kou—was going downhill

and fast. The emperor had already died. Rokuta recalled Rakushun saying something about sending for his mother.

Rakushun said, “I’d like to find out more of the kingdoms around here, see how things are going in Kei.”

“Expanding your horizons is always a good thing.” Rokuta jabbed the dumpling skewer in Rakushun’s direction. “If it’s about your mother, I’ll take care of it. How about you go check out Ryuu?”

“Ryuu?”

Rokuta nodded. He said in a hushed voice, “Recently, youma have shown up off the coast of Ryuu.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Word is that perhaps they were swept in from Tai. But youma don’t go barging into a kingdom that isn’t in trouble. Something stinks.”

Rakushun mulled it over.

Rokuta added, “When I say I’d like to go see what’s going on in Ryuu, I mean somebody who can put his other work aside and get on with it. If you could do this for me, it’d be a real help.”

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

Rokuta’s face lit up. “Hey, I appreciate it. Something strange is going on, I can feel it. There’s Tai and Kei and Kou. And on top of that, Ryuu. Recently, none of the kingdoms around En have been on an even keel.”

“That’s true.”

“If something fishy is going on in Ryuu, no matter how insignificant, I want you to let me know as soon as possible. I know I’m asking a lot. And while you’re at it, I’ll handle things for your mother and check in on Youko.”

Rakushun nodded, and then turned his thoughts eastward.

Rokuta said, “Youko being Youko, she’ll be okay.”

Rakushun looked at Rokuta.

Rokuta said, “I trust her. It’ll be tough for a while, but knowing her, she’ll pull

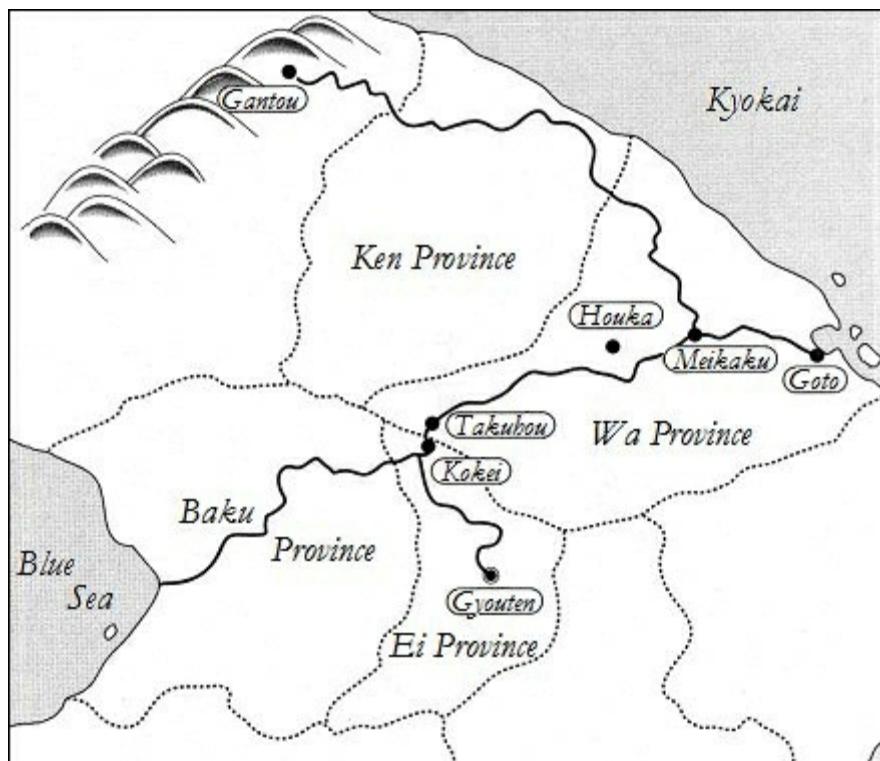
through. Ever heard of the word *kaitatsu*?"

"No."

"It's particular to Kei. It means a longing for an emperor. A *man*. After so many bad empresses in a row, it's not an unreasonable sentiment. Even I was wondering if an empress really was a good idea. But my concerns were quickly put to rest. Youko being a girl means she gets judged on her looks alone. That's why we're the only ones who can really put our faith in her."

Rokuta grinned, and Rakushun smiled as well. "Yes, that's very true."

The province of Ei, with the capital Gyouten at its center, was shaped like a bent bow. Hokui Prefecture, in its northern quarter, was located at the very tip of the bow, west of Gyouten. In the eastern part of Hokui Prefecture was Kokei, or, as most people called it, the city of Hokui. Across the river was Wa Province and the outskirts of a big city called Takuhou.



At a small cemetery on the outskirts of Hokui, Rangyoku brought her hands together in prayer. She was at the grave of the children who'd been killed at the orphanage. Their parents had died. They had been entrusted to the orphanage. In the end they'd been killed by the youma. Half a month later, she couldn't stop thinking of the fear and suffering they must have experienced.

Taking along the goat she'd left at the gate, Rangyoku returned to the town. During the day, she let the goat graze on the vacant land adjacent the city, and

now she was taking it home.

Kokei, the town Rangyoku lived in, was an appendage of the city of Hokui. From her perspective, Kokei really did look like a bump on the side of Hokui. As she pulled the goat along behind her in the cold wind, the town's appearance struck her as rather forlorn. She entered the town through the Kokei gate and returned to the orphanage.

When she went around back of the orphanage to the barn, Keikei was running out of the back door to do his evening chores. With him was Youshi.

"Hey, you're home!"

Keikei's high voice carried far. Youshi gave her a slight bow. Rangyoku smiled in return. *She is an odd one.* A kaikyaku, Enho said. Enho said she was a member of the orphanage but she was more like Enho's guest.

Most towns were run by a town manager and a superintendent. The town manager worked in the town hall and officiated at the Rishi. The superintendent was his principal advisor. The superintendent was the most senior of the town elders. He was also headmaster at the orphanage and elementary school. Yet Enho was not from Kokei. When Rangyoku asked about this, she was told he was from Baku Province in the west of Kei. The posts of manager and superintendent were usually filled by people from that town.

The more she thought about it, the odder Enho's situation seemed.

Or so it seemed to her. She didn't understand the ins and outs of becoming a superintendent. The town manager certainly treated Enho as if he were of a considerably higher rank than himself. Enho had many visitors. They traveled great distances to see him and stayed over at the orphanage in order to talk to him. She didn't know who they were or why they came to see him. Even when she asked about them, no one could or would tell her. It was obvious that his visitors greatly respected him. They came here to be taught by him. They were the ones staying in the guest quarters.

The rike compound where the orphanage was located generally consisted of four buildings. The first was the orphanage, where the orphans and elderly people stayed. The second was the assembly hall, where the townspeople could gather. When they returned from the villages and hamlets during the winter, the

assembly hall was where they would come during the day. There they would weave and do piece work. Sometimes at night, they would turn the place into a bar and drink and have a good old time.

The guest quarters was a building for people visiting the orphanage or the town. Attached to the guest quarters was a garden. In the garden was the cottage Enho used as a study and where he spent most of the day. The care and upkeep of these buildings and the people and visitors who gathered there was the responsibility of the residents of the rike.

Youshi had a room in the guest quarters. That was according to Enho's explicit instructions. People who didn't live in the orphanage itself weren't really residents of the rike. In the first place, the people who lived in the orphanage were supposed to be from the town and Youshi obviously wasn't.

It just seems so strange.

Rangyoku left the goat to Keikei's care and went back to the kitchen with Youshi. She watched as Youshi drew water from the outside well and filled the tank in the kitchen.

Aside from the fact that Youshi had been given a room in the guest quarters, she spent the days the same as the other members of the orphanage. She helped out in the kitchen and cleaned up around the rike. The only really different thing about her was that when Rangyoku and Keikei were done with their chores and went off to play, Youshi went to Enho's study.

Probably because Youshi is a kaikyaku. He's teaching her what she needs to know about living here.

That's what Enho said and it probably was true.

"What's up?" Youshi suddenly asked her.

Rangyoku started. Youshi had caught her standing there staring off into space. "Um . . . oh, nothing."

Youshi only quizzically tilted her head to the side, so Rangyoku asked her straight out. "Why did you come to Kokei?"

Ah, Youshi said to herself. "Well, I didn't know anything about this world. A

person I know arranged for me to meet Enho. So here I am.”

“Is Enho an important person? It’s just that so many people come to see him.”

“I don’t know. From talking with him, though, he’s obviously a very wise man.”

“Huh.”

When she was finished drawing the water, Rangyoku had her wash the vegetables. While dicing the vegetables, Rangyoku asked her, “Um, what kind of place is Yamato?” Old people said that it was the land of wizards. A land of dreams, where there was no suffering or grief.

“It’s not so different from here. There are natural disasters and there are wars.”

“Oh.” She was somewhat relieved, and also somewhat disappointed.

“Can I ask you a question?” said Youshi.

Rangyoku stopped cutting the vegetables. “What?”

“Is Rangyoku your *azana*?”

“No, it’s my real first name.”

“People here have so many different names. It’s very confusing.”

She sighed, as if she truly were at a complete loss. Rangyoku couldn’t help smiling. “I take it in Yamato you don’t have an azana. The name listed on the census is your full name that you use all the time. An azana is just a casual nickname. In olden times, nobody called you by your given name. Old-timers hate being called by their given name but I don’t care. My registered family name is So. When I become an adult, I’ll choose my own surname and the characters for that name. But I’m not an adult yet.”

Becoming an adult meant reaching one’s majority. At the age of twenty, every citizen received a plot of land from the government and became an independent person. This plot was called a partition or homestead. Those twenty years were calculated according to *kazoe-doshi*, meaning that a child was one year old when born and counted a year older every New Year’s day.

Youshi laughed. “See, there are so many ways to count your age. What a

mess."

"Normally, age is counted by your birthday. It's because of compulsory service. Using kazoe-doshi, you can end up with people who are all seventeen years old but have all different sizes of bodies."

Becoming an adult and receiving a homestead meant paying taxes too. But age wasn't taken into consideration when it came to compulsory service. In an emergency, even ten-year-olds would be rounded up. Rebuilding dikes, digging ditches, building villages and hamlets, and in the worse case, fighting wars. It was rare to draft soldiers who hadn't reached the age of eighteen, but if troop strength proved insufficient, the draft age would be lowered.

"Compulsory service also used to be done according to kazoe-doshi, too, but that was a long time ago."

"Huh."

"Yamato doesn't have compulsory service?"

Youshi shook her head, a sardonic smile creeping onto her face. "It doesn't, but it often seems like compulsory service is year-round."

"How's that?"

"Adults work from morning till midnight. Children study from morning till midnight. It's not actually compulsory, but if you don't work harder than everybody else, you'll get left behind. So everybody works through the night to the break of dawn."

"Sounds awful," said Rangyoku.

Keikei burst into the kitchen, having finished tending to the goat. "I'm done!" he cheerfully declared, ready for his next job.

"Well, then, clean off the table and get out the dishes."

"Okay."

A twinkle in her eyes, Youshi watched Keikei dart off, rag in hand. "Hard worker, Keikei is."

Rangyoku readily agreed. "He is, isn't he?"

The abundant pride she evidenced made Youshi smile. “Is Keikei his name?”

“It’s his nickname, what everybody calls him. His real name is Rankei.”

Youshi laughed. “It really is very confusing.”

Chapter 25

[6-2] Youko didn't have a good idea of who Enho was. Keiki arranged for her to come to the orphanage and asked him to be her teacher. According to Keiki, Enho was a distinguished scholar. She hadn't been able to get anything more out of Enho either, other than that he was also the superintendent of Kokei.

The day after she arrived, Enho had Youko come to his study in the afternoon and then after supper so that they could get acquainted. At first, they chatted about nothing important. After that, he spent several days inquiring into her personal history. Then he asked about Yamato. What kind of country it was, the nature of the geography, what kind of business and industry it had, how it was governed. What people thought and dreamed about.

As Youko conversed with Enho, many things surprised her. She was mortified at how little she knew about her native land.

After straightening up the kitchen after lunch, Youko slipped down the portico to the study. Along the way, she allowed herself a sigh. Another day answering questions. Day after day, the breadth and depth of her ignorance grew and grew.

When she got to the study, Enho wasn't there. She looked out at the garden and saw him sitting in the gazebo-like tea room, bathed in sunlight.

"Oh, there you are."

When she walked out onto the veranda facing the tea room, he smiled. "The weather's turned out so nice today. Youko, come and have a seat."

She obediently sat down on the bench in the tea house.

"This must be your first winter here. How are things going?"

"It doesn't feel so different from Japan."

"Oh?" said Enho. He nodded. "Kei is fortunate compared with the kingdoms to the north. Still, in the northern part of the kingdom, you can freeze to death living outdoors. Game is scarce in the fields. It's not the same as the warmer

kingdoms. There, even if the yield is poor, you can plant during the winter and gather a harvest. So, during the winter, what do you think the most important thing is to people?"

"Um, a warm house?"

Enho stroked his beard. "I can see how that would be true in Yamato. But, no, not a house but food. Yours is the opinion of someone from a country whose people do not suffer from starvation."

Youko bowed her head in chagrin.

"It is a particularly grave concern in the kingdoms to the north. A spate of bad weather during the summer will show up in the fall's harvest. A poor harvest is taxed no less than a bountiful one, and a proportion must be set aside for next year's planting from what remains. Eat your seed corn and next year you will starve for sure. Even when the storehouses are full, in some kingdoms, goods cannot be easily transported during the winter. In some kingdoms, even if you are starving, the ground will be frozen too hard to dig for roots."

"I get that."

"Talk it through and you'll figure it out. You only have to work at it."

Youko glanced at Enho's profile. "Were you perhaps testing me?"

"No. I don't set out to test people. I just try to determine where the problems are. You're a stranger in a strange land. The gulf between here and there is vast. There's no way that I'm going to be able to comprehend where you've come from."

Right, Youko said with a nod.

Enho gazed at the garden for several minutes. Then he said, "It is a universal truth that the foundations of the kingdom are in the land."

Caught a bit off guard, Youko came to attention.

"All citizens receive a plot of land when they reach their majority. A single allotment is equal to one hundred *are*, or one hundred paces squared [one hectare]. Nine allotments form a well brigade. A well brigade, or one square *ri* (900 *are* or nine hectares), is owned by eight families."

"Wait a minute. The units of measurement . . . "

Rokuta, the kirin of En, often crossed the Kyokai to Yamato and was well-versed in things Japanese. He managed to bring back with him some books and a few tools. According to what he'd taught her, one pace was equal to 135 centimeters.

"If one pace is 135 centimeters, and one *ri* is 300 paces, then . . . "

Watching her run through the calculations, Enho laughed. "You're thinking about it too hard. One pace is equal to two strides. This is a stride." Enho took a single step forward. "The width of a step is one stride. Two strides, left, right, is equal to one pace."

"Oh. That makes sense."

"So two steps, or strides, makes one pace. When referring to area, one pace squared is also called a pace. And a *shaku* is as follows."

Enho put his hands together as if praying, and then opened his hands, spreading out the palms. "The width of my hands is one shaku. One shaku is ten *sun*, so each *sun* is approximately the width of a finger."

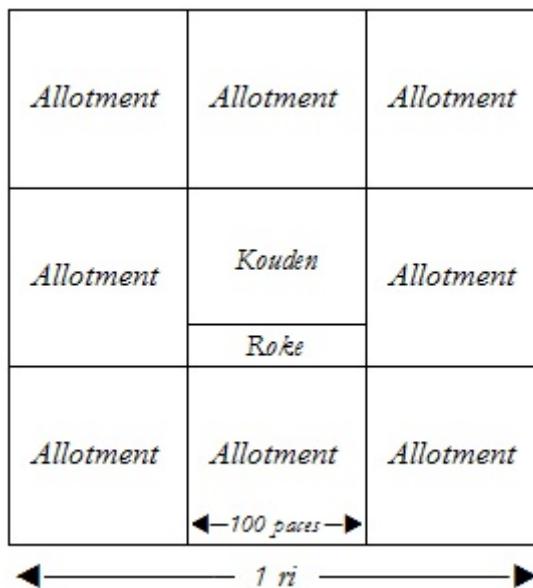
"Got it."

"One *jou* is harder to describe but it is generally the height of a man. One *shou* can be thought of as the amount of liquid scooped up with two hands." He added with a smile, "Because a large man has a longer stride, his *ri* will be bigger than an actual *ri*. Similarly, a small man's *shou* isn't going to add up to an actual *shou*. Keep this in mind and things should average out right."

"I see," Youko said with a small laugh.

"To sum up, one allotment is equal to one hundred paces squared, a plot of land four hundred paces in circumference. As farmland, it's quite spacious. Nine allotments make up a well brigade. This land is divided up amongst eight families. The well brigade is the smallest division of jurisdictional discipline that the kingdom exerts over the citizenry itself."

"Eight families on nine allotments?"



Enho gave her an approving smile. “One allotment serves as the commons. Eight families farm the eight allotments, and the ninth is held in trust by the kingdom. Eighty percent of the commons, called the *kouden*, is yielded to the government as tax. The remaining twenty percent, called the *roke*, is reserved for houses and gardens.”

Ah, that's how it works, Youko thought, recalling the scenes of hamlets dotting the countryside. The hamlets consisted of the same general number of buildings. Not enough buildings to be called a village, but assembled together in a kind of proto-village.

“The kouden is eighty *are* and the roke is twenty *are*. And twenty *are* is?”

“Um . . . two thousand square paces.”

“That’s right. A single family’s share is two hundred square paces for the garden, fifty square paces for the house. Do you know how big a garden of two hundred square paces is?”

“Um, no.”

“Fruits trees and mulberry bushes are planted around the periphery. The land left over is devoted to the garden. The garden should be sufficient to provide for one house and two people. A house of fifty paces is small. Two rooms, living room and kitchen. I believe in Japan it is called a two *eru-dee-kee*.”

Youko grinned. “A 2LDK.”



Enho smiled as well. “A house is generally counted as two people. There is enough land to supply the food and a house big enough for two. Eight such families constitute a hamlet. Three hamlets make a village. The village is smallest division of municipal incorporation. Three hamlets of eight families come to twenty-four families, plus the rike equals twenty-five.”

“And you can get a house in the village as well?”

“Yes. The hamlets are in the countryside, so when the land lies fallow, there’s not much for them to do there. During the winter, the twenty-four families return to the village.”

Youko smiled. If she listened carefully, right now she could hear the lively voices from around the rike. The women had gathered to spin and work the looms. The men had gathered to weave mats and baskets. They would be talking about the goings-on in their hamlets.

“In any case, the basis of everything is the one square *ri* that constitutes a well brigade. It is governed according to the *seidenhou*, the law of well and paddy.”

Youko took a breath. “Yes. It’s written in the Divine Decrees, on the scrolls of the Law of the Land.”

Oh? said Enho, hiking up his white eyebrows.

“But I could hardly read any of it.”

Not only was it written in medieval Chinese characters but in *hakubun*, a particularly dense kind of unpunctuated Chinese text. She found it mostly incomprehensible and she didn’t have access to a Chinese-Japanese dictionary. It was way over her head. Even having Keiki read it for her and following along in

the text, she didn't have a clue.

"It would be preferable if somehow you could learn to read Chinese."

When Youko sighed, Enho laughed. "That's okay. You've got a good memory. If you work hard and take things seriously, you have what it takes to get by okay."

Unconsciously she straightened her posture.

"The smallest possible house on the smallest possible plot of land. Work hard, and if there are no natural disasters or unexpected phenomenon, you'll never be left to starve. All citizens of the kingdom get this minimum allotment. Whether or not they can live comfortably depends in the end on their own resourcefulness."

"And when there are natural disasters?"

"What you must keep in mind is the former, not the latter. Don't try to shoulder the burdens of the entire population. You must concern yourself with water and land management and your own self-discipline, and by doing so extending your life if even just a little."

"I know that, but . . ."

"As for the things that you ought to do, they are quite limited. To prepare for droughts, create reservoirs and dig canals. To prepare for floods, build dikes and levees and improve the watersheds. To prepare for famine, stockpile grain. To guard against youma, train the military. Then there's the untangling of the red tape that is the law. But that's about it. And these are mostly the responsibilities of the ministers, not something you should be doing yourself. All right? Was there anything else troubling your mind?"

Youko laughed. "I guess you're right."

"Save superfluous thoughts like making the kingdom rich and prosperous for later. First, concentrate on quelling the turmoil and unrest, on making sure things are not getting any worse."

Youko took a deep breath. She felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "Thank you," she said.

Chapter 26

[6-3] “So it’s faster coming back the other way? Why’s that?”

Suzu was standing on the deck, facing the wind. Hearing the kid’s voice, she grimaced.

“It’s the season. The wind blows from the northeast. The ocean currents also flow from north to south. That’s why the return trip is faster.”

“Huh.”

When she turned around, she saw Seishuu sitting next to a sailor.

“Boats are real interesting. I’m going to become a sailor!”

“Good for you,” the sailor laughed.

From Sou to a port in the southeast of Kei would take half a month. Already she had come halfway on her voyage. There weren’t many people on the boat, so she’d gotten to know everybody. Seishuu was the youngest. He talked to everybody without the slightest hesitation. Because he always had something smart to say, even the sailors said he was a clever kid and doted on him. Watching all this irritated Suzu.

He doesn’t understand anything. But he’s just a kid so he can’t help it.

Still, it ticked her off whenever he tried to tell her that the awful things that happened to her happened all the time, like being separated forever from her home.

All the time? Just how many kaikyaku do you think there are in this world?

With a huff, Suzu turned her back and returned to the stateroom.

The stateroom was filled with the smell of oil. It had repulsed her at first, but she’d gotten used to it. Still, if she stayed inside for long, the rolling motion of the boat and the smell made her sick to her stomach. That was why, when there was good weather, most of the passengers went out on the deck. Right now, Suzu was alone in the room.

The stateroom was split into two large areas where everybody slept. For the time being, there was a section for men and a section for women, but only because there were so few passengers.

Suzu sat down and let out a breath. From behind her, she heard that annoying voice.

"Hey, Suzu, quit giving me those looks the way you do."

Suzu didn't turn around. She pulled her luggage toward her as if she were busy. She opened a package inside the trunk. "What are you talking about?"

"That sailor got on my case. He thought I was teasing you or something."

"Oh?"

The light footsteps approached her. Seishuu sat down next to her. "What are you so mad at me for?"

"I'm not mad at anything."

"What a big baby."

Hearing his exaggerated sigh, she glared at him. "*I'm* an adult. *That's* why I'm not mad. I don't let myself get upset by what children do."

Seishuu gave Suzu a brief, searching look.

"What?"

"You look like an easy-going person on the outside but you're a sourpuss underneath."

Suzu turned on him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nobody's ever said that to you before? You really can be a pain."

Although knowing that if she lost her temper she'd lose the argument, Suzu couldn't keep the blood from rushing to her head. Almost without realizing it, she hit him. "Shut up!"

Riyou. Kouko. Everybody hates me. Everybody has it in for me.

Seishuu's eyes flew open. He laughed. "I don't believe it! I'm right!"

"Get out of here!"

“Nobody likes to hear the truth about themselves.”

“I said, get lost!”

“Does it hurt your feeling that much, telling you that lots of people are just like you? I wasn’t wrong. Lots of people can’t ever go home again. It’s tough for everybody. There’s nothing special about you. But you don’t get it, that’s what makes you such a meanie.”

“I hate you!” Suzu couldn’t take it anymore and broke down in tears. The truth hurt. Nobody she’d met in this world liked her. Nobody understood her. Nobody ever felt sorry for her.

But why? “Why does everybody pick on me? Riyou, you, what do you all have against me? What did I ever do to you!?”

“Who’s Riyou?”

“The mistress of Suibi Manor, in Sai.”

It all gushed out of her. How cruel Riyou was. How demanding she was. All the hardships Suzu had suffered. How she was rescued by the Imperial Sai, who turned around and kicked her out of the palace. But saying all this wouldn’t make a bit of difference to a child like him.

“It’s too bad, Suzu. You’re more of a kid than I am.”

“What?”

“Do you like yourself, Suzu?”

Suzu shot him a surprised look.

“Do you think you’re a good person?”

“Not really.” She was so miserable all the time.

“So it’s hardly surprising that other people don’t like you either, huh? After all, don’t people put themselves first and always think of themselves first?”

Suzu gaped at him.

“You’re asking an awful lot, expecting other people to like you when you don’t even like yourself.”

"I didn't mean—" Suzu hastily arranged her thoughts. "That's not what I meant! Of course I like myself. Who doesn't? But nobody ever tells me! I don't like the *me* that nobody else likes. That's what I meant."

"So does that make the people who don't like you bad people? What if you changed your attitude and became a likeable person? But that's too far of a reach for you. So you end up being disagreeable. Nothing more. End of story."

"You don't understand!" Suzu wrung her hands together. "You don't understand me! It's because I'm a kaikyaku! Kaikyaku are different from people like you! That's why you all hate me for no reason at all!"

"You know, I can't stand people like you." Seishuu took a breath and let it out. "Who'd want to be like that? Trying to be unhappier than anybody else, then taking the easy way out and blaming your unhappiness for all your problems."

Suzu gasped. She detested this little runt to a degree that made her dizzy.

"It's really dumb," he continued. "All you can do is brag about how you're unluckier than everybody else. And even when you're not, you're the kind of person who makes sure that you are."

"No fair! You're just being mean! Why do you have to say things like that? After all the suffering I've been through!"

"Did all that suffering make you a better person? Does all your patience make you feel better about yourself? Me, when it comes to suffering, I'd rather put it behind me." Seishuu cocked his head to one side. "Do you think if you weren't a kaikyaku, everything would be peachy? You're a wizard. You won't get sick, won't ever grow old, right? What do you say when you're around people who really are sick and suffering? Wizards don't have to worry about eating either. You go to where people are starving to death, are you still gonna think you're worse off than them?"

"I don't want to talk to you. You just saying that because you caught all the lucky breaks and I didn't."

"I caught all the lucky breaks?"

"Yeah. You were born here and grew up here. You've got a family and a place to go home to."

"I don't have a home."

"What?" said Suzu.

"I used to live in Kou. And not just my home, but our entire village is gone." Seishuu wrapped his arms around his knees. "We lived near the Kyokai. The whole cliff gave way and sent everything and everybody into the sea. Well, not everybody, if you're gonna get picky about it. There's always me." He laughed. "Everybody who was at home, my aunt and the kids, they all died. I'm lucky to be alive."

Suzu was at a loss for words. She recalled the village that had given her shelter when she was swept ashore in Kei. The village overlooking the ocean, clinging to the edge of the cliffs. If that cliff collapsed . . .

"Go to Kou and you'll find a lot of kids like me. The emperor died. The Taiho died too. It's going to be hard times until a new emperor sits on the throne and that's not going to happen overnight. Everybody's getting out while they can. I don't know when they're going to get a new emperor. But I'm not going back until they do. Maybe I'll never go back."

"But . . ."

"My village happened to be close to the borders of Sou. I was lucky enough to escape. Kou is only going to get worse. After this, even if you wanted to make a run for it, it's not likely you could."

"Still, you *wanted* to escape."

"Not everybody wants to run away. You own home is always best. Lots of people started running and were lining up at the borders. Then the youma came and ate them up. Doesn't matter if they had homes to go home to, they're not going home now." He muttered, almost as an aside, "My father neither."

"And your mother?"

"Dead," Seishuu said with an unsettled laugh. "We were all going to get a boat and sail to Kei. She died before the boat came into port. I gave my mom's ticket to that old man."

A scrawny, middle-aged man had come aboard with him.

"He's from Kou too. He got out with just the clothes on his back. Didn't have the money for the fare."

"But why Kei? You escaped to Sou." Sou was the wealthiest of the Twelve Kingdoms.

"Because we're originally from Kei."

"From Kei?"

"The empress of Kei, the one before the empress we've got now, left things in a really bad state. When I was real small we fled to Kou. There ought to be a nice quiet village there, right? Mom said we'd go back when Kei got a new empress." Seishuu took a deep breath. "Mom and Dad weren't very lucky. They died knowing nothing but hard times."

Suzu gave him an irritated look. "My parents suffered a lot, too. We were poor and never had anything good to eat. And then the crops failed. I was sold as an indentured servant and sent packing."

"Yeah, but that's better than everybody dying."

"You only say that because you're so fortunate. Your parents were good to you, right? My parents were the kind of parents who sell their children."

"True, I liked my parents but it's lonely being the only one left."

"Same with me. You're the lucky one. You were with them to the end. I'll never see my parents again. I don't know what became of the country I left, except that they're all dead for sure."

"So, we're in the same boat together."

"We're not the same! Just being there when they died, that was a blessing. I wanted to care for them in their old age."

"Being there when my mom died, well, okay. But my dad was eaten by a youma. I really didn't want to see that."

"Still, he was there with you till the end! I wanted to take care of them no matter what happened. I didn't want to leave their side ever."

Seishuu tilted his head to the side. "You know, Suzu, you're doing everything

you can right now to be unhappy.”

“What?”

“You’re being cruel. It should be pretty obvious whether it’s better to see your father torn to piece and eaten by a youma or not. I didn’t want to see that. I couldn’t run to him, either. I couldn’t do anything to help. I had no choice but to run away. My father has no grave. There was no funeral. Do you really mean that is better?”

Suzu’s hand flew to her mouth. “I . . .”

“It’s a lie to say that your suffering is worse than anybody else’s. Everybody suffers the same. If there’s somebody somewhere who’s never suffered, I’d like to meet them.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t . . .” She bowed her head in chagrin. This child had seen his father slaughtered in front of his eyes. There was no way that was the better fate.

“When things really get that bad, people do what ever they can to escape it. If it’s not bad enough to do that, Suzu, you weren’t suffering enough to want to run away.”

“But . . .”

“I don’t know how to describe it, but you know that feeling when you want to die and you know that fighting on won’t do any good?”

“That’s, um . . .”

“Talk is easy. Suzu, whatever you suffered wasn’t bad enough to try to escape or die trying. Nobody’s gonna feel sorry for people who drown themselves in their own misfortunes. After all, living your own life is a full-time job. If you had someone sidling up to you all the time and wanting you to feel all sorry for them, you’d get sick of them. Don’t you think?”

Is that what it comes down to? Is that why nobody could stand to have her around? Though she could hardly believe that Riyuu or Kouko every really suffered in their lives.

Um . . .” said Seishuu.

Suzu looked up and saw that Seishuu was resting his head on his knees.

“What’s wrong?”

“Being around you makes my head hurt.”

Suzu gave the smart remark an equally sharp look, but then noticed the sweat on his brow. “Does it’s really hurt? Are you all right?”

“I’m okay.”

He rolled over and lay down. His face was gray.

“Hold on. I’ll go get somebody.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll feel better after some sleep. I’m used to it.”

Suzu peered closely at his face. “This happen often?”

“Now and then. It’s this injury that hurts.”

“Injury?”

“A youma nicked me in the back of the head. It starts hurting now and then.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll be okay. It gets better after I sleep.”

Suzu hurried to get a blanket and tucked it around his shoulders.

Chapter 27

[6-4] Shoukei was assigned to the superintendent in charge of the palace buildings in the Ministry of Heaven. To be precise, she was made a servant to his underlings.

Her day began before daybreak. She was awakened before she could see the first rays of dawn and started earning her daily keep by dusting all the furniture. She polished the windows, swept, mopped and polished the floors. Before the empress and ministers awoke, everything had to be washed and dried.

The gardens were groomed while the empress and ministers were in their meetings. Weeds were pulled, the cobblestones swept and scrubbed. By the time the high officials finished with their duties and returned to their ministries, everything had to be wiped down again. And then she had to rush back to the place they just left and straighten it up. At the end of the day, she washed all the cleaning rags and went to bed right after dinner.

If she were mopping the floor or washing the cobblestones and the empress or a minister happened to pass by, she had to prostrate herself right there in the place she was cleaning. She stooped over or kowtowed until the person in question had gone by. Otherwise, she had to walk around with a big pile of rags in a hamper on her back. If anybody complained about a spot of dirt anywhere, she had to fly over, bow with her face to the floor, and wipe away the stain.

Her quarters were in a dorm in a corner of the Imperial Palace. She was given clothes to wear and was never hungry. Winters in Kyou were slightly more temperate than winters in Hou, and the world above the Sea of Clouds even more so compared to the world below. But life here was worse than it was when she was living in that poor little village in Hou.

The other servants took pride in working at the palace. Pride was the furthest thing from Shoukei's mind. Until three years ago, she'd been the one walking on the polished floors, the one being kowtowed to. Having to scrape the floor with her forehead in a palace like it was her own personal hell.

On top of that, the Imperial Kyou Shushou assiduously avoided her. Since that

first day, she hadn't spoken to her once. At best, as Shoukei crawled along the floor, she might spy a glimpse of the brilliant silk train of her dress, a whiff of fragrant perfume, the clear, lucid chiming of her swaying *obidama* as she sailed past her.

Once it had all been within her grasp.

"What's this?"

Shoukei put down the cloth she was using to dust the furniture and picked up the ornamental hairpin in the shape of a flower. It was made from a kind of limpid ruby mined in the Kingdom of Tai. It was in the shape of a peony, carved from a single crystal of the transparent, scarlet gemstone, a gorgeous, blossoming flower, layered with petals so thin it was easy to imagine them bending at the touch of a fingertip.

"I used to have dozens. The ministers fell over each other presenting them to me."

She was in a room inside the imperial repository. The jewelry was neatly lined up on a shelf, wrapped in clothes.

So what's with all these things? Probably got stored here and long forgotten. Stored away, belonging to no one, put away for safekeeping, waiting to be disposed of by the next emperor or to decorate the hair of the empress consort or princess royal. And so the gifts just piled up in the repository.

Or the empress.

Shoukei was seized with the urge to dash the hairpin on the floor.

The Imperial Kyou. Or the Imperial Kei.

Right now, these were the kinds of accolades and glory raining down on them. And this was the cruel lot that she, the mere daughter of an emperor, had been left to.

"Sooner or later, everything comes to an end."

Every dynasty comes to an end too. The day comes when the corpses roll on the floor.

She tried calming herself with these words but would not be pacified. Her life

would end before that day came for the Imperial Kyou and Imperial Kei.

"You done in there?"

The sudden voice made Shoukei's heard skip a beat. The old woman who oversaw the superintendent's servants had caught sight of her.

"Um . . . yes, I am."

"Well, then, get onto your next job. If you don't hurry up and get it done, you won't be in time for dinner."

"I'm sorry," Shoukei apologized, rewrapping the hairpin.

The old woman laughed. "Allowing young women in here is always a mistake. I understand how you feel, but don't go around touching the fine merchandise. There'd be hell to pay if any of it got broke."

"Yes," she said, placing it back on the shelf.

"They all think, what would this look like in my hair? Oh, I'd be so beautiful. I did the same thing when I was your age."

Shoukei glanced back at the wrinkled old woman. The woman smiled. "It's always a disappointment. It don't look right on girls like us, just looks sad and funny, like decorating a scarecrow with flowers."

Shoukei picked up the cleaning cloth and clenched it tightly.

"We've got the arms and legs of people who work for a living. Strong physiques and even dispositions. Got no rank or fine jewelry to wear, but you don't need those to have pride in a sound body and mind. Don't need to care about doodads like that."

But I'm different. The words stuck in her throat. She painfully swallowed the retort.

With no idea what Shoukei was thinking, the lady laughed. "Only makes it worse, you still being young and all. And kinda cute as well. But you got to treasure what's been given you. You don't want to go lusting after baubles and ignoring your hard-won talents. Well, when you're done here, go to the room in the back."

Her head bowed, Shoukei hurried out of the room and went to a room deeper in the building. She closed the door and took several deep breaths.

The jewel of Youshun Palace. Skin like pearl, dark blue hair like the sky before daybreak. Eyes the color of amethyst. Waves of praise and adoration falling on her as ceaselessly as the waves breaking upon the shore. She'd lost all of it and for no reason of her own.

"I used to have tons of these," she said to herself, approaching the shelf.

This was the room where the ceremonial fineries were kept, used to dress up the empress or princess for religious festivals. Robes entwined with the feathers of a phoenix, strings of black pearls like so many poppy seeds woven into a fretwork, a diadem displaying a phoenix perched on the branch of a Chinese parasol tree.

The jewels could be plucked by the handful from the gemstone fountains in the Kingdom of Tai. She knew for a fact that the pearls harvested in the southern waters of the Red Sea were the most valuable.

All gone. All those beautiful things that had once been hers were locked away in the imperial repository in Hou, waiting for the next emperor to be crowned.

"They were all mine."

They'd been made for her, tailored to her specifications, presented to her by her retainers. Why must they pass right under her nose to the next empress? Shoukei found herself possessed of the conviction that she must be the next empress of Hou.

I am the empress. Just like that girl the same age as me, the Imperial Kei.

That girl got lucky and robbed her of everything that once belonged to her. Here she was, crawling and groveling, being worked to death, growing old and decrepit without a speck of joy or happiness, while *she* adorned herself with all these treasures.

Unforgivable.

The Imperial Kei took everything Shoukei had lost. Some girl who'd been a big fat nothing until the kirin chose *her* had grabbed everything Shoukei lost. A peon

like her didn't deserve a thing.

Right now she'd be in the Imperial Palace in Kei, living it up on cloud nine. Like Shoukei, she'd never dream that one day she'd lose it all. She'd be too busy dressing herself up in her countless gowns and adorning herself with ruby hairpins.

I'll steal it all back. Shoukei would take from that girl everything that had been taken from her. She casually placed the phoenix diadem on her head. There was a mirror in the corner of the room. She removed the dust cover and gazed into the glass.

Fits me like a charm.

She quickly straightened her clothes and prettied up her hair.

Let's say I take this from the Imperial Kei.

And the throne as well.

If it was okay for Gekkei, that monster who'd killed her father and cast her into these miserable circumstances, then it'd be okay for her, too. Shoukei glanced in the direction of the Imperial Kyou's living quarters. *I'll take it from her*, she thought momentarily. But it would never fill the void in her soul the same way taking it from the Imperial Kei would.

She said aloud, "I'll usurp the throne of the Imperial Kei."

And when she did, she'd cheerfully tell the Imperial Kyou to put up or shut up. *The license you gave to Gekkei, now you give to me.* Then at last she would be at peace.

Shoukei put down the diadem. She carefully wrapped it in its cloth and placed it back on the shelf. Instead, after perusing all the objects, she chose several smaller baubles and ornamented belts and hid them inside a pile of rags in the cleaning hamper. If she broke them apart and sold the gems, she'd have enough to cover her travel expenses to Kei.

Of course she'd be found out. Everything in here was under the purview of a conservator, and his underlings came by every day, dusting off and polishing the merchandise. But that a concern for tomorrow. They had all completed their

work for the day.

She inspected the position of everything on the shelf, filling in the spaces left behind. With an innocent look plastered on her face, she did her cleaning and then hid the bounty in the undergrowth in the garden. Wearing a guileless expression, she washed her rags and ate dinner. She returned to her room with four other servants and pretended to sleep while she waited for night to fall.

In the dead of night, she strapped the hamper to her back and approached the main gates to palace complex. She called out to the nightwatchman there, saying that as a punishment for her carelessness, she had been ordered by the empress to clean her riding tack.

With a doubtful look on his face, the nightwatchman let her pass.

If there were no mounts there to fly her away from the gates, she'd never get out. The pegasi were kept in the imperial stables outside the gate but they couldn't be ridden by ordinary servants.

I'm no ordinary servant.

Entering the stables, her eyes fell upon a flying horse called a *kitsyou*. She quickly saddled him up.

"I used to have a *kitsyou* of my own."

She grinned, flung open the stable doors, laughed in the face of the nightwatchman running toward her, and launched herself into the sky.

"Amazing."

Shushou sat her flabbergasted self down in the chair. According to the nightwatchman, a servant had commandeered a Pegasus. Ignoring his commands to halt, she'd flown away from the palace gates. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be Shoukei, the princess from Hou given over to her custody. Not only that, several valuables had vanished from the imperial repository.

"She certainly surprised me."

"You have done all you can for her," the kirin answered in a perplexed voice. More than one of grace or refinement, this kirin left an impression of profound

naiveté.

Shushou smiled sweetly at her retainer. “I’ve done what? No matter what the circumstances, breaking the law is still a bad thing. Right?”

“Who drove her to do such a bad thing? Please consider that as well.”

“But of course,” Shushou laughed. “C’mere, Kyouki.”

She beckoned him with her smiling countenance to come up next to her and squat down. Kyouki obediently knelt down and looked up at his eternally young liege. Then the palm of her hand striking the side of his face. The sound alone made the assembled ministers flinch.

The hand she raised against the Saiho of the kingdom didn’t even leave a mark. Shushou shook the stinging sensation out of hand. “I would have preferred a kirin smaller than me, like the En Taiho. I want to give somebody a walloping and my arm won’t even reach. It is really annoying.”

“Your Highness . . .”

Shushou said with a grin, “That Shoukei was really annoying, too. Such a stuck-up brat. She had nothing but contempt for the life of a servant, didn’t she? Otherwise, what would be the point? I wanted to needle her a bit.”

“Your Highness!”

“The princess royal becomes a mere servant, working from dawn till dusk, kowtowing to people. So she steals some things and runs away and that’s the end of it? Times like this, a kirin’s compassion makes me laugh.”

With a *hmpf*, Shushou raised her head and gazed down at her retainer, cowering there with downcast eyes. “What is with you kirin? Don’t you realize that this so-called compassion is like spitting in the face of all the other honest, hard-working servants?”

Shushou looked down at the disheartened man. “Nobody lives better than the royalty of a kingdom. I live a better, more blessed life than any servant, but I also bear far more responsibilities than any servant. That’s why, though I live a life clothed in silk, the servants forgive me that and bow their heads. Were that not the case, I’d pretty soon lose my head like the Imperial Hou. No?”

"Ah . . . yes."

"Shoukei didn't have a clue about those responsibilities. She didn't live up to those responsibilities. The godforsaken work is too hard, cleaning is too hard. She whines and complains and carries on like the spoilt child she is. If we look the other way now, we're insulting all the people who do those jobs and do them well. If we treat her the same as everybody else who puts in a full day's work, who doesn't steal, who doesn't run away, how are we keeping faith with those good people?"

Shushou sighed and glanced down at her hangdog kirin. "I understand people like her but she is unworthy of anybody's pity. With all these gushings of misplaced compassion, you ought to be a mortician. You're exactly the right person to bring to a funeral. Stand there weeping with a kirin by your side, I'm sure it'd be very consoling to the bereaved family."

"Please forgive me."

Shushou called to the assembled ministers. "Dispatch the Imperial Army and capture Shoukei. Contact Han and Ryuu and ask them to extradite her if the criminal falls into their grasp."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

The servant from the imperial repository still lay prostrated before her. Shushou gave her a long look. "Raise your head, please. I know that you are surrounded by many temptations in the course of your duties. You have done well to resist them."

"But I failed to supervise her properly."

"That was not your fault in the least. You have served well. Keep up the good work, okay?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

At the sight of the overwhelmed old lady, Kyouki touched his cheek and sighed.

Part VII

Chapter 28

[7-1] Enho spread out the map of Kei on the table. “You can safely assume that the capital province will be located in the middle of the kingdom.” As maps went, it didn’t have nearly the detail that a map in Japan would have. From it she could understand the gross features of the land but little more than that.

“In the case of Kei, Ei Province is in the middle. Surrounding it are eight provinces. This is also in accordance with the Divine Decrees. The province lord of Ei Province is the Taiho. Essentially, the land of Ei Province is divided up and enfeoffed to the imperial ministers. Technically speaking, the ministers are not given a salary. They are confined to specific territories within Ei Province called duchies. From the taxes raised within each duchy, a portion is assessed by the kingdom. What remains constitutes the minister’s income.

“The smallest taxable jurisdiction in a duchy is a town, for which the imperial assessment is five percent. To this, poll taxes and other levies are attached. Consequently, a public servant with an enfeoffment of a single town will often tax up to fifty percent of the revenue from the operating homesteads for his own income. The largest taxable jurisdiction is a county. There, a county tax assessor can be appointed by the duke. The process is the same in the districts of the provincial capitals as well.”

“So the district the provincial capital is located in is divided up and enfeoffed to the provincial ministers.”

“That’s right. So, what do you see as the strong point of this system?”

Youko tilted her head to the side. “If you don’t have paper money, when you pay your public servants, wouldn’t they have a hard time taking it home with them?”

Enho smiled. “We do have such things as bank notes so that shouldn’t be a concern. The ministers are given land. When there is a famine, the income of the

public servants must necessarily decline.”

“Oh, I see. Income levels are free to fluctuate on their own, without lowering and raising salaries.”

“That’s right. And the disadvantages?”

“The possibility of despotic rule?”

“Yes. A chief constable is guaranteed to be stationed at least in the capital province. He sends inspectors into every county and prefecture to audit the business of government. But his eyes cannot reach into every nook and cranny. Inspectors are accorded the same authority as county superintendents. But inspectors and superintendents can conspire together and pretty much do as they please. Though the gross tax rate is set by the kingdom, there is much room for personal discretion in the assessment of fines and levies. That is why, whenever a duchy in the capital province changes hands, the people have cause for either celebration or despair.”

“I see.”

“In the case of Hokui Prefecture, where Kokei is located, it is in the Duchy of Yellow. It does not have a duke. It is governed instead by the Taiho. Long ago, it was the domain of the Province Lord of Wa.”

“The Marquis Gahou.” Youko knit her brows. Amongst the province lords, Gahou was held in considerable disrepute. He was said to be a crafty and conspiring man, cruel in his governance of the province. Many voices clamored for his dismissal but he never gave them the chance.

“At the time of the ascension of the Late Empress Yo, Gahou was appointed *Daishiba*, head of the Ministry of Summer and was enfeoffed Kokui County in Hokui Prefecture. He later left that post to become province lord of Wa. When the people of Kokui heard that, not a few of them wept tears of joy to be free of his clutches. Gahou is a jackal who cut off his tail and stood on his hind legs. He’s a dangerous man, one who never leaves a chink in his armor exposed.”

“The Rikkan doesn’t know how to deal with him, either. Their investigations never turn up sufficient grounds for dismissal.”

“Indeed. At any rate, this kind of thing—”

A knock at the door made both Enho and Youko look up.

"Hey, Gramps," said Keikei, bounding into the study. "A messenger came! Oops, sorry."

Enho took the letter from Keikei. He opened it and cast a concerned look in Youko's direction.

"What is it? Bad news?"

"Oh, it's nothing," said Enho dismissively, folding up the letter. He said to Youko, "It looks like I'll be having a visitor tonight."

Meaning there would be no lessons after dinner. Youko nodded.

Keikei looked up at Enho. "A guest? So he'll need a meal and a room?"

"Oh, no need to worry about that. He'll be here after dinnertime and will be returning tonight as well. I'll make all the arrangements. You can go to bed without any concerns."

That night in her bedroom, Youko secretly met with a visitor of her own. Hyouki, one of Keiki's shirei.

"And how is everybody doing?" she asked, apparently to no one. No one besides her was visible in the room.

"As always, they're doing well." The answer seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere in the room. A person overhearing the conversation would imagine a voice coming from beneath the floor. That wouldn't necessarily be wrong. Hyouki had hidden himself within the ground.

Shirei could travel through the invisible conduits and currents in the heavens and in the earth. Following these pathways, they moved unbeknownst to humans. It was called *tonkou*, or "the art of hidden escape." Keiki could travel on the currents of the wind but he couldn't move that far. He certainly couldn't travel all the way from the palace at Gyouten to Hokui.

Because he couldn't make the trip by himself, he sent his shirei in his stead. Hyouki reported in detail about the conditions of the palace. Upon his return, he would in turn relay to Keiki how Youko was doing.

"Koukan's whereabouts are still unknown."

Youko nodded. Koukan had plotted her assassination and then slipped his shackles and was currently on the run.

"There is a rumor among the province lords that Your Highness has fled to En in fear for her life."

Youko had to smile. "I thought they'd come up with something like that. Well, let them go on believing it."

"Nevertheless, you must be on your guard. If Koukan were to discover your current location, he would certainly conspire to kill you again."

"No need to worry. Hankyo and Jouyuu are with me."

"I shall communicate the same."

She saw Hyouki off, though not literally. He simply left from where he was. And Youko exited the room.

The basic layout of the apartments in the building consisted of one open room or living area attached to two private rooms. This was the case with Youko's room as well. In terms of Japanese architecture, it consisted of two 3 *jou* bedrooms adjoining a 4.5 *jou* living room. In a big house, the bedroom on one side would have a bed for sleeping and the other room would be furnished with a divan that could be used as a bed or couch. There'd also be a writing desk and shelves so that it could be turned into a study. Between the two rooms was a living area. During seasons when the climate was agreeable, the door could be opened and screens set up to preserve some privacy.

It was also common to completely remove the thin, sliding doors, creating a large open space. More than a room, it turned into a broad extension of the veranda. Youko figured she could put a table and chairs there.

There wasn't any class in the sliding doors at the rike. Paper was glued to the fine latticework within the doorframe, like a Japanese *shouji* door. Those doors were closed. When she went to bed, unless she wanted to discourage others from coming in, no matter how cold it was, it was considered polite to leave the doors open a crack.

From Youko's living space, she could directly see the portico facing the small study that was sandwiched between the courtyard gardens. She saw a silhouette

advancing down the corridor. She fixed her attention on that spot.

She could only make out that it was a man. Not young enough to be a boy and not an old man. He was wearing a cotton-padded jacket over a plain outfit. And a hat. A black veil fell down from the brim of the insignificant-looking cap. A shawl was wrapped around his neck up to and covering his face. As a result, she could not make out any features of his face.

“Who is that?”

Now matter how hard she looked, his face remained hidden from her. The silhouette appeared to bow and disappeared into the study. Youko observed this, drawing her eyebrows together. Then she left the living room and headed down the corridor to the orphanage.

“Rangyoku.”

Hearing Youko’s voice from the hallway, Rangyoku lifted her head. Keikei jumped to his feet and took Youko by the hand.

“What’s going on?” Rangyoku asked.

“Let’s go play!” Keikei said.

“Could I speak with you a minute?”

“Go ahead,” said Rangyoku with a smile. She took the pot from off the brazier. She’d brewed some tea in the kitchen and was warming it on the brazier. “Oh, that’s right. Enho has a visitor, so you don’t have classes tonight.”

“That’s right,” Youko smiled, taking the teacup Rangyoku offered her.

“Do you know who it is?”

“His visitor? I don’t know. I haven’t heard anything.”

Keikei tugged on her sleeve. “Hey, sis, it’s that guy, the one with the calico hair. I delivered the letter for him.”

Ah, Rangyoku nodded. She thought maybe he’d said his name was Rou. He had black hair mottled with brown. He visited Enho occasionally. He seemed to be some kind of servant. She didn’t know anything more about him than that.

“Rou-san. So then who that creepy visitor?”

“Creepy?”

“The way he always hides his face. The way he calls on Enho now and then. First he sends Rou-san. He always comes at night, and always late into the night. I know when he’s coming because Enho says it’s okay not to lock all the doors at night.”

“Do you know where he’s from?”

“No. I asked Enho, but he wouldn’t say a word. I don’t like him.”

Keikei nodded as well.

“Don’t like that man?”

“He’s got to be a bad man, for sure,” said Keikei, looking at Rangyoku.

Rangyoku gently rebuked him. “You shouldn’t say that. But whenever he come by, the next day Enho looks all depressed.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He won’t say. Just one more thing to worry about, you know?”

“Yes, I know very well.”

She talked a while longer with Rangyoku and Keikei and then returned to her room.

“Hankyo.”

“I am here.”

“Tail that man when he leaves. I want to know where he is lodging.”

He had to be staying somewhere. The city gates would be closed at this time of night.

“By your command.”

Chapter 29

[7-2] The boat passed Mt. Koushuu at the borders of Kou and Kei. The Koushuu were the ranges of mountains that demarcated the borders between each of the eight kingdoms. There was at least one crossing, and no more than three, where the mountains could be traversed from one kingdom to the other.

Because every kingdom had the same geography at its borders, the borders were also known as the Koushuu. Suza gathered that from the Koushuu mountains separating Kou and Kei to the port of Goto in the northern quarter of the Kei, centrally located on the eastern coast, was a trip of four days and four nights.

"Hey, Suza, I've got a present for you!"

Suzu was standing on the deck looking out at the ocean. Seishuu ran up to her.

"Here," he said, proudly producing a piece of dried fruit, a candied apricot.

"What's this?"

"It's for you," he said with a pleased look.

What a strange child. He'd given her such a hard time she expected him to keep his distance afterwards. But that wasn't the case. Rather, they seemed to bury the hatchet rather quickly. He was cheeky enough to come into the women's stateroom and sleep next to her. Suza as well was somehow able to keep her temper in check. Anyway, anybody picking on Seishuu because he was a child would catch it in spades. The kid really had a mouth on him.

Also because they were now sleeping in the same room, Suza couldn't help noticing how often he was in pain. Almost every morning found him holding his head and moaning. He wasn't lying when he said that he'd get better after some rest, but even when he was on the mend he often got sick to his stomach. When he was well, he'd go back to behaving as if nothing were wrong. Otherwise, he could hardly keep his feet under him and had to half-crawl, half-walk to get around.

Suzu suspected that Seishuu didn't have an ordinary illness. He said he'd been

attacked by a youma. Suzu had seen the wound once, a small cut on the back of his head right beneath his pony tail. It didn't look like a severe injury, but he said his head began to ache only after being wounded there.

"Hey, Seishuu, you really okay?"

He popped an apricot into his mouth and looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"Your injury. You say it still hurts, so that must mean it's not healing. How are you doing?"

"You're right. I'm not really okay."

"Have you been seen by a doctor?"

Seishuu shook his head, no. "Never had the time. But it's okay. I just got to rest for it to get better."

"Is it as bad as it used to be? Or is it somehow getting worse?"

She had noticed that the periods of time he was in pain were getting longer and longer. And after he woke up, it was taking him longer before he could walk normally.

Seishuu said in a disconcerted voice, "Hard to say."

"The last couple of days, you've been rubbing your eyes. Are your eyes feeling bad, too?"

"It's getting hard to see."

Suzu gasped. "Then obviously something's wrong. Don't keep saying it's getting better. When we get to Kei, we're taking you straightaway to see a doctor."

"Okay."

"Did you have a place you needed to go?"

"Seishuu shook his head. "My mom's dead."

"I don't believe it. You just randomly headed for Kei? Shouldn't you have stayed in Sou?"

Seishuu turned away with a huff. "Mom said to go back to Kei so I'm going

back to Kei."

Suzu took a deep breath. "At any rate, when we arrive in Kei I'm taking you to a doctor. For all we know, you could be at death's door."

Seishuu trembled. "You know that because you're a wizard, Suzu? Am I really dying?" He looked up at her with the frightened face of a child.

"It's just words, Seishuu. I don't have any reason to thinking you're dying."

"You've got a mean streak in you, Suzu."

"Yes, I do. Sorry. And you're a plenty bad stinker of a kid as well. Besides, you know that only the good die young."

Seishuu laughed in agreement and Suzu gazed briefly at his bright, smiling face.

The sailor laughed. "Feeling seasick, little guy?"

"No way," Seishuu shot back.

Suzu poked her head out from the shelter and wrinkled her brows in concern. It was awful the way he dragged his body along. The sun was low in the sky and yet his condition hadn't improved.

"But I am feeling a little dizzy."

"Don't get yourself all worked up so. Take it easy. You must be getting all worked up about returning to Kei, huh?"

"I'm not!"

The sailor said that because Seishuu's hands were trembling. More than a tremor, he was almost convulsing.

"The best thing to do when you're sick is to sleep it off. Tottering around like this you're going to fall overboard."

"Okay," Seishuu laughed and disappeared into the stateroom.

Suzu watched this with some relief. Seeing Seishuu like that frightened her terribly. A headache or a few tremors, perhaps she wouldn't be very concerned. But day after day it all piled up, that's what worried her so. She followed Seishuu into the stateroom. Seishuu was sitting there with a vacant look on his face.

“You okay?”

Seishuu looked over his shoulder at her, glancing around the stateroom with a puzzled look on his face. He blinked several times, then rubbed his eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not okay at all. My eyes are really blurry.”

“But are your eyes okay?”

Suzu rushed up to him. She knelt down on his right and examined his face.
“Does it hurt? Do you have a headache?”

Several times, Seishuu glanced back and forth between Suzu and the wall in front of him. “Suzu, I can’t see you.”

“You can’t?”

“When I’m looking ahead like this, I can’t see you at all.”

Suzu hurriedly directed her gaze forward. People normally had a wide field of vision. She could clearly see Seishuu out of the corners of her eyes.

“What’s wrong with me?”

His childlike face colored with fear.

“Seishuu—”

His stricken countenance crumpled. She thought he was going to cry but instead he laughed. The tint of fear still hung in his eyes. “I guess I’m a good boy after all.”

“Seishuu.”

“Yeah, looks like I’m going to die.”

“No, you’re not! Don’t say stupid things like that!”

His face fell again.

“Let’s go together.” Suzu reached out and grasped his trembling hands. “Let’s go to Gyouten together.”

“Gyouten?”

"I'm going to Gyouten to see the Imperial Kei. Surely the Empress will be able to heal you. The best doctors are in the Imperial Palace. So shall we?"

Seishuu shook his head. "I don't think people like that are going to want to see me."

"But it hurts, doesn't it? And your headaches are real bad. What happens if things just keep getting worse and worse?"

"Do you think she can heal me?"

"If the Imperial Kei can't, we'll go onto Sai. I'm sure the Imperial Sai will."

"Okay," Seishuu nodded. A small tear spilled down his cheek. "I'm scared to die."

"Seishuu."

"No matter who you are, everybody dies. But you can't laugh about your own death."

"Idiot. You're going to be fine."

Seishuu laughed and cried at the same time. "It looks like I'm going to have to practice my poker face a lot more."

"Don't be a smart-ass." Seishuu nodded and rested his head in Suzu's lap. "Everything's going to be okay," she said, stroking his back. "I promise."

Three days later, they finally made it to Goto. Though called a "port," Goto had no real docks or piers. Instead, a series of large boulders had been sunken off the coast in a gentle arc. The boat anchored to the stones within the arc, and then barges came out from the cliffs to meet them. The barges were from the floating wharf at the foot of the cliffs. From there, a stone stairway carved into the cliff face in switchbacks up to the top of the cliffs.

Suzu helped Seishuu down from the stones, assisting him on his right side. His eyes still hadn't improved. Since that day when he said he couldn't see her, the vision on his right side hadn't returned.

Many times his feet got tangled up and they almost fell. A longshoreman, seeing that Suzu was not able to support Seishuu without losing her own footing, offered to carry him the rest of the way. They arrived at the top of the

cliffs out of breath. From there they could survey the whole of the countryside. A long and narrow village spread out along the edge of the cliffs.

The Kingdom of Kei, Wa Province, the port of Goto. They were in the eastern reaches of Wa Province in the northeast quarter of Kei.

Seishuu slid down from the man's back and took in the landscape. Suzu grasped his hand. They were going to Gyouten. The Imperial Kei was going to help them.

Chapter 30

[7-3] The kitsuyou galloped effortlessly through the sky. Shoukei looked down at the landscape and felt a heavy weight lift from her chest.

This is the only way to go.

She wouldn't be meekly returning to the orphanage or becoming a servant again. From the start, she'd determined to free herself and run away. She was never going to kowtow to anybody ever again.

Shoukei headed straight for the Black Sea, arriving at a town along the coast before the gates closed. There she sold an earring, fixed up her clothes and got a room. The sensation of silk against her skin after so long, a luxurious meal, a bed made up with embroidered quilts. She went to sleep, checking her urge to shriek aloud with delight.

The next day she sold another earring and flew off toward the Black Sea

A kitsuyou could cross a kingdom in two days. She passed over the featureless borders and entered Ryuu. There she got a room. The following day she headed north along the coast. Before evening, she had arrived at Haikyou, a port town in the central part of the kingdom. She was now closer to En than to Kyou.

The kitsuyou's reins in hand, she passed through the big gate. The gate was covered in a carved floral pattern. The walls were punctuated with a series of latticed skylights. Lanterns hung from the eaves, lighting the cozy forecourt that spread out from the middle of the gate. It was a large inn.

A man came running out to meet her. To Shoukei question he smiled and bowed low. "There is a fine room available, m'lady."

"Good," said Shoukei, smiling sweetly in return. "I shall stay here then. Please look after my kitsuyou."

A groom hurried over and took the kitsuyou's reins. A bellhop undid the luggage from the saddle and the groom led the kitsuyou to the stables next to the gate. Shoukei went from the forecourt into the building through the gated entranceway.

Immediately inside the doors was a large parlor. Tables were generously spaced along the walls at which the guests sat and conversed together. To the concierge who walked up and bowed, Shoukei took a silver hairpin from her fashionably done-up hair and held it out to him.

“Should this cover everything?”

Because travelers preferred to not carry large amounts of cash with them, payment was often in kind. Large inns always had a small shop where personal items could be exchanged and where accounts were settled. If the payment proved excessive, upon checking out the balance was paid in coin. The concierge took the hairpin and confirmed its workmanship with an enthusiastic nod of assent.

“It is quite sufficient. I shall deposit it against your account.”

“If it is not enough, please let me know.”

“Thank you very much. Shall you be eating dinner tonight?”

In the smaller inns, there was always a tavern open to the street and the rooms on the second floor. The larger hotels served meals in the restaurant facing the courtyard or in the guest rooms. The guest rooms in a small inn were for sleeping only—beds set up on a wooden floor and a sink. The sink wasn’t guaranteed. Many inns didn’t provide even these accommodations. Cheaper establishments simply had a bunch of cots lined up on a dirt floor with not even screens separating them. A traveler slept together with complete strangers.

Beds in an average hotel had canopies and curtains, along with a sink and a small table. In a fancy hotel like the one Shoukei was staying at had two bedrooms in which she could make herself at home, and a living room where dinner could also be served.

“I’d like a room.”

“In fact,” said the concierge, a concerned look on his face, “a ship just came into port. We have many guests and no single-occupancy rooms. Would you mind sharing a room?”

A hotel of this class would definitely have two bedrooms per room, and so was set up to handle double-occupancy reservations. If there weren’t enough

vacancies available, double-occupancy rooms were converted into shared rooms.

"Are there no other options? I wouldn't want to end up with some yahoo."

"I am indeed sorry. We would be happy to arrange for you to stay at another hotel, but I'm afraid they are all booked as well."

"I guess it can't be helped."

"Unfortunately, not in this case. If you would please follow me, I shall show you to your room."

Shoukei was shown to a room on the third floor. They walked down a corridor that overlooked a small courtyard and arrived at a room toward the back. It was hardly the best room in the place. In these types of buildings, the higher you went, the lower the ceilings became. Besides, the best rooms faced the gardens.

"Here is the room."

The room he stopped at was in a wing in the back of the hotel. The beautiful fretwork on the door was glazed with glass, revealing the interior of the room. Behind the door was a living room arranged with furniture of above-average quality.

Two wide doors led to the bedrooms. The key fitted the bedroom door. There was no key for the door into the living room, as it was not considered a private room. This was how double-occupancy was accommodated.

"Thank you."

She handed some change to the bellman who delivered her luggage to the room, and sat down in a chair in the living room.

"What a stupidly prosaic room." A smirk came to her lips.

She didn't feel even a twinge of guilt. The Imperial Kyou had driven her to this, so what was so bad about giving her a taste of her own medicine? The Imperial Kyou could lose any number of her personal accouterments and hardly notice a thing missing. At any rate, she'd probably inherited most of it. And Shoukei had "inherited" it from her.

"If I take it easy on this trip, I should get to Kei in six days."

The capital of Kei, Gyouten. The capital of the eastern kingdom that the Imperial Kei now occupied. Once she got there, then what? She had to start somewhere. In order to get close to the Imperial Kei, she had to get into the Imperial Palace. That wouldn't be easy.

Shoukei didn't have a passport that could vouch for her identity. She'd left behind the papers given her in Hou. She'd heard that there were officials who could forge passports for a price but had no idea where to find the kind of corrupt bureaucrat who could do such a thing.

Getting into the Imperial Palace in Kei with only a passport was far from impossible. The empress had only recently ascended to the throne and so there was likely a considerable turnover in the staff. Shoukei was cultured and educated. If she expressed a desire to serve the empress, the odds of her getting hired were good. At the same time, after so short a time on the throne, the empress would no doubt be lonely. No matter how many officials and bureaucrats she was surrounded by, somebody genuinely nice would no doubt catch her eye. Shoukei was perfectly capable of sucking up to the Imperial Kei. She'd wait for the chance, and strike.

And besides, she knew the workings of the Imperial Palace inside and out.

"But maybe I should go take a look at Tai."

Nobody needed a passport in a kingdom that had lost its emperor and was in chaos.

The Imperial Tai had been enthroned two years before Hou changed governments. Not more than half a year later, an Imperial Rescript was issued to all the Twelve Kingdoms announcing the empress's death. The rescript was delivered by the new emperor. But an Imperial Rescript was hardly required when the emperor of another kingdom died. A phoenix bird in every Imperial Palace would sing forth, making the announcement. The phoenix birds had remained quiet in regards to the Imperial Tai. When Shoukei was living at Youshun Palace, the phoenix bird hadn't uttered a peep about the demise of the Imperial Tai.

If the emperor lived, there was no reason for a new emperor to arise. Clearly, this was a pretender. In fact, nobody really knew what was going on in Tai.

Kingdoms tended to keep their internal affairs to themselves.

If Tai had lost its emperor, then Tai would be in the same predicament as Hou and there was no way she was going back to Hou. *For the time being*, she muttered to herself, *Tai it is*.

“So, where are you headed?” asked the waiter who brought dinner.

Shoukei looked down at the dishes being placed there and furrowed her brow.

Oh, great.

The table was being set for two. She’d be eating with some complete stranger. She made a face. Answering the waiter’s call, she saw someone came out of the other bedroom—apparently they’d been in there all along—and lowered her brows. Bad enough that she had to eat with a stranger but he was a—

Hanjuu.

A person born half a beast. Though there weren’t a lot of them, they weren’t scarce. In Hou, a hanjuu would never be caught dead in an establishment like this. And in beast-form, certainly would never be allowed into the courtyard.

As if he did not see Shoukei sitting there, brows fully furrowed, he hustled into the room and said to the waiter, “Thank you!”

He had the voice of a child. In the form of a rat, he was no taller than a human child but was wearing a man’s tunic. He tipped the bowing waiter and sat down.

As if finally seeing her there, he said, “Hello.”

“Hello,” Shoukei replied under her breath.

“Surprised at how many guests there are. I wonder if these arrangements are common in Ryuu?”

Shoukei didn’t answer. It was bad enough having to sit at the same table with a hanjuu. She averted her gaze.

“Today is unique,” said the waiter. “A ship arrived from En. Were you aboard that ship?”

The hanjuu said, “Oh, gotcha.”

“About half of our guests disembarked. And about half will be reboarding. And

where are you headed?"

"I thought I'd see the capital."

"Ah," the young man smiled. "Wonderful place. The lilies are beautiful. Though you've chosen to travel during the cold part of the year."

"It's not so different from En."

"Is that so?"

"En is pretty cold too. It's further south than Ryuu but catches the seasonal winds."

The young man turned to Shoukei. "And where will you be going next?"

"Tai," she said shortly.

The waiter's eyes opened wide. "But Tai—"

"Is in turmoil, I know. That's why I'm going. People I know live there. I've been worried how they're doing."

"Where in Tai?"

Shoukei's heart skipped a beat. "And why should you want to know?"

"Oh, no reason," the young man answered, with a nervous laugh. "I was originally a sailor on a ship that sailed between Ryuu and Tai."

"Really?"

"We shipped grain to Tai, carried gemstones on the return voyage. Tai is pretty short of grain. But we didn't make it last time around. There were so many youma we never got near the place."

"Huh."

"It's pretty scary when a kingdom surrounded by the Kyokai falls into chaos. The youma who live at the bottom of the ocean rise to the surface. Before you know it you're completely isolated. In fact, this winter, I have no idea how the people of Tai are going to eat."

He didn't pose the question as if expecting an answer so Shoukei instead thought about Hou. Hou was in the same predicament. Even after cultivating the

land, the harvest yielded only enough for people to scrape by on. If a harvest failed for any reason, there wouldn't be enough to go around.

"Was your friend able to get out of Tai?"

"I hope so."

"So many people are trying to flee Tai. Most of them come to Ryuу. Our last cargo was mostly people. There were so many people flooding into the port, wanting to leave Tai so badly they were clinging to the gunwales. We had to take them on board. If we didn't, they would have capsized the boat."

"Wow."

"Long story short, it's a dangerous place. Sea traffic is closed. I got my parents to help me come here. There are colleagues of mine there still waiting for a ship."

"I see."

"Good thing you've got a kitsuryou. It looks like no ships are sailing for Tai. The news from En as well is that sea traffic to Tai has been suspended."

Shoukei's eyes opened wide. "You heard I came on a kitsuryou? Already?"

The young man laughed. "A rare thing it is for one of our guests to arrive on such a splendid pegasus. Well, not really, I guess." He turned to the rat, who was politely finishing his dinner. "Your *suugu* tiger is even more impressive. It's the first time any of us have seen a *suugu* so we've all been stopping by the stables to take a look."

The rat stroked his whiskers. "Well, not so impressive. It's a loaner."

Shoukei looked at him. With a mount so impressive, in spite of his being a hanjuu, of being a child—what she thought he was—that's why he was being treated like a man.

The waiter said, "But the sky is plenty dangerous as well."

Realizing the statement had been directed at her, Shoukei quickly nodded. "Yes, I . . ."

"Perhaps you had best go on to Kei."

"To Kei?"

"Warships still manage the journey from Kei to Tai to rescue refugees."

"Really?"

"People from Kei bring in refugees to cultivate new land. In exchange, they're registered on the census and are given a plot of land. When I was traveling to Tai, ships from Kei periodically left Tai with refugees. There aren't so many opportunities as before but I still think they're doing it. Getting a ride with them is probably the best way."

"You think so?" Shoukei just managed to check her delight. Go to Tai. Wait for a ship and return to Kei. Get registered on the census and head for Gyouten. It'd be easy. "That's good advice. Thank you."

She meant it from the bottom of her heart.

From Tai to Kei. Satisfied that there was light now at the end of the tunnel, Shoukei returned to her bedroom and went to sleep. With a brazier to warm the room, she slept warmly and comfortably beneath the embroidered futons.

She was awakened in the middle of the night by a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" she said, frowning. That rat no doubt had something he wanted her to do.

"Excuse me." It was the young man who had served them dinner.

Shoukei sluggishly got out of bed, put on a robe and went to the door. "What's this about?"

"Something I remembered about Tai."

Shoukei unlocked the door. She was debating whether or not to open the door when it was jerked open. Shoukei recoiled, cowering. Standing in the living room was the young man and several soldiers wearing blue armor.

"What?" Her heart pounded in her chest. She somehow managed to ignore her racing pulse.

"Let's see your passport."

The blood drained from her face. "What are you talking about? At this time of

night! We can take care of it tomorrow.”

Her throat was dry, making it difficult to raise her voice in protest. The soldiers pressed into the room and surrounded her.

“Where’s your passport?”

Her knees began to shake. “Truth is . . . I lost it.”

“Your name?”

“Gyokuyou. Son Gyokuyou.”

With an expressionless face, the soldier looked at her and then at his colleague. “You’ve got a kitsuryou, huh. Where’d you get it?”

“I . . . I don’t recall.”

They regarded with great suspicion. She bit her lip. She had said the first thing that came to mind and it was a lousy lie, if she said so herself.

“Search her things.”

“Stop it! You can’t just do whatever you please!”

As she raised her voice, Shoukei felt that this was the end. She’d finally made it to Ryuu, and the Imperial Kyou had reached out her hand after her and taken her into her clutches. Her gaze flitted about the room. She had to get away but soldiers held her by both shoulders. Even if she could escape them, there was nowhere to run.

The soldiers went to the bed stand and pulled out a small satchel secured with a leather belt. They opened it, and from amidst the clothes pulled out the delicate fineries.

One of the soldiers was holding a piece of paper, and checked each item off against a list. “A decorated belt, a gold buckle with the emblem of a phoenix dragon. Phoenix bird earrings. A string of jade pearls. They’re here.” He turned to Shoukei. “You’re missing two sets of earrings and a hairpin. Where are they?”

Shoukei couldn’t answer. She was trembling too violently to speak. She’d be arrested, she would answer for her crimes and be judged. Finally, it dawned on her. Why hadn’t any of this occurred to her until soldiers were walking all over

her?

The penalty for theft . . . Shoukei searched her memory and goosebumps came out on her skin. *Crucifixion*. You were tied down to the road and nails driven into your body until you died.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

The door to the room opposite opened and the rat stuck his head out. He rubbed his sleepy eyes. Shoukei jabbed her finger at him. “I don’t know anything about it! He gave it to me!”

“What?” The rat cast a stunned look at the soldiers.

“Passport?”

“It’s in my room.”

“Name?”

“Chou Sei.”

The soldier checked his travel documents and folded them back up with a disinterested expression. He jerked his chin toward the door.

“Let’s go. The both of you.”

Part VIII

Chapter 31

[8-1] “I don’t recall giving you anything.”

Bound in cords, Shoukei sat in a jail in Ryuu. The jail was so cold frost was forming on the walls. The rat had been arrested along with her.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d tell me what’s going on.”

Shoukei didn’t answer. She didn’t have a good answer. Accused of a grave crime, she’d immediately blamed another person. That’s all it came down to.

“What’s your name?”

“Shoukei.”

The guilt weighed so heavily on her mind, she tossed off the answer without thinking.

“Shoukei . . . that wouldn’t be the name of the princess royal of Hou?”

Shoukei unconsciously nodded.

“Her full name is Son Shou. Her azana is Shoukei.”

“I . . .”

How was it that a hanjuu from En would know such things? The imperial family’s name was not widely circulated. The surnames of such high status individuals were not loosely bandied about.

“There were rumors that you died and rumors that you lived.”

“Who are you?”

The rat stroked his whiskers. “My name is Rakushun. An ordinary student.”

“Ordinary students ride *suugu pegasi*? ”

“Like I said, it’s a loaner. Are you being pursued because you’re the princess royal?”

Shoukei didn't reply. She remembered what had happened to her the last time she'd confessed who she was. "If there's something on your mind, go ahead and ask me."

"I think you have more to worry about than me."

Shoukei flashed a crooked smile. "You know why I'm in jail? Because when you screw up, you get crucified."

Rakushun tugged on his whiskers. "Crucifixion? I guess that is what they do in Hou, the only kingdom that executes a criminal for the crime of theft. In fact, Hou has already repealed that law."

"Really?"

"The Imperial Hou was quite the disciplinarian. Theft was a capital offense. Stealing gold or specie from the imperial family merited death by the flogging. In the case of gems and jewelry, crucifixion. Stealing food got your head placed upon a pike. Have I got that right? But only in Hou. Normally, it's a hundred lashes. In Ryuu, it depends on the crime. A hundred strokes with the cane and ninety days of hard labor, I believe."

Shoukei looked at the rat in surprise. He was conversant in the laws of other kingdoms. This knowledge was the province of government officials. In fact, few among those charged with enforcement of the laws were that well-versed in the penal codes of other kingdoms.

She explained this and asked again, "You're really an ordinary person?"

"An ordinary student. Any school student from En should know as much."

"Secondary school?"

"No, university."

Shoukei again looked at him with wide eyes. In Hou, there was one secondary school per province. The one national university admitted no more than a hundred students, so becoming a university students was no small feat. A university graduate would become a civil servant or a high public official. Many dreamed of being accepted but there were those who would take the entrance exam every year of their life and never pass.

"A child like you? How old are you?"

Rakushun's whiskers drooped. "I'm always mistaken for a child. No matter. I'm twenty-two."

Shoukei blinked. It wasn't impossible but he was still improbably young. It wasn't simply a matter of first qualifying for the selection process and then passing the entrance exams. He'd also need the recommendation of his secondary school principal. It was not rare for students to be over thirty.

"That's quite impressive." This rat had it made. A comfortable life as a government bureaucrat. Shoukei had nothing. Not a thing. Only to wait for her trial, tied up in this jail.

"Getting arrested like this isn't exactly a good thing. I'll probably end up being expelled."

Shoukei looked at the rat. If he was indeed a college student, not only his intelligence but his integrity had been called into question. Of course, considering the crimes they were accused of, he would undoubtedly be expelled.

However, Shoukei remembered, she would probably be extradited to Kyou, there to enjoy the scorn and punishments of the Imperial Kyou. And it was likely that her punishments would be more severe than what was normally called for. This rat hardly stood to lose everything he had. Shoukei had only her life left to her. One slip and she'd lose that too.

"I wonder what's going to happen next? So what happened to you? Why did all those Ryuu soldiers come storming into our room?"

Shoukei wouldn't answer the question. She turned her back and slumped back against the wall and closed her eyes, showing she had no more inclination to talk. From behind her, she heard a small sigh.

She feigned sleep but could not sleep. Trembling, she passed the night till dawn. The next day she was dragged out of jail. As she was hauled to her feet, she cast a glance back at the jail. From inside the jail, the rat leaned forward and gave her a fixed look.

The jail was in the depths of the city hall. Shoukei had no idea whether this city was located in district or prefecture or county or anything else. Criminal cases

were prosecuted in county and provincial courts, but a jail could be located anywhere.

Shoukei was escorted to the main chamber of the city hall and sat down on the floor, still bound. A fat middle-aged man sat on the rostrum in front of her. The jailers seized Shoukei by the binding cords and forced her to bow till her forehead touched the floor.

“The princess royal of Hou, Son Shou.”

“No, I’m not. I could not possibly be such a personage as that.”

The man smiled quizzically. “Is that so? We have word from the Imperial Kyou herself that the princess royal of Hou stole objects from the Imperial Palace and fled the country. We also received notice of a warrant being issued by the empress for her arrest. The Imperial Kyou kindly provided a catalog of the stolen articles, which together with the warrant was delivered by carrier pigeon. How do you explain that most of the articles listed in the catalog were found amongst your belongings?”

“They were . . . given to me.” Her head pressed to the floor, she had to spit out the words. “The hanjuu I shared the room with gave them to me.” Shoukei made the assertion, guilt heavy on her mind. *I’m sorry, but there is no way I can go back to Kyou.*

The man on the rostrum roared with laughter. “Do you really think that anybody here actually believes such lies?”

“But—!”

“That’s exactly what a naïf like the princess royal would say. She steals from the Imperial Palace in Kyou and flees the kingdom, stupid enough to stay in inns along the way. Instead of abandoning a conspicuous animal like a kitsuryou, she takes it along with her. Goods she should have pawned at once she instead carefully hides in her luggage.”

Shoukei bit her lip. She truly had botched it from the start. She’d been so happy to be free that she had left common sense by the wayside.

“And all you stole were a few trinkets and baubles. How like a girl. A very silly girl.”

"*Kensei*," a voice addressed the man on the rostrum. A *kensei* was a county court judge, meaning she was in a county court. "Would the princess royal have done such a foolish thing? It stands to reason that this girl is not the princess royal."

"That is a possibility," the judge agreed cheerfully. "Of course not. The truth must lie elsewhere. I shall ask her again. Are you the Princess Royal Son Shou?"

"I'm not!" she screamed at the floor, grasping at this one last straw.

"So the real princess royal forced these items upon you and did so in order to mislead her pursuers. But would she have given such hard-won treasures to a complete stranger? No, not likely. So, what is it, miss? Were these items really given to you? Or did you steal them?"

Shoukei couldn't answer.

"Raise your head and look me in the eye. Are these stolen goods?"

Shoukei raised her head and looked into the red face of a man wearing a complacent smile. "No . . . they are not."

"Were they given to you? If they were, what kind of person runs around bestowing such idiotic alms on complete strangers? Or rather . . . "

The judge's voice softened to a coaxing purr. "Or rather, isn't it true that they've been yours all along? Afraid that your possession of them would be thought incriminating, you said they'd been given to you? It was mere *coincidence* that they happened to resemble the items in the catalog, when in fact they have nothing whatsoever to do with the booty spirited away from Kyou."

Grasping the direction in which he was steering the conversation, Shoukei nodded. "Yes."

"Yet aren't such fineries a bit too rich for a girl like you?"

"But . . . they're mine . . . really."

"Doubtful. Still, we're busy around here. Things to do, places to go. We do not have the time or resources to go around investigating every little suspicious incident. Once the court has been compensated for the costs of your

confinement, you shall be released.”

The implied deal now clear, Shoukei recoiled inside. The man was asking for a bribe. The clerks and officials in the courtroom were all snickering as well.

She said, “Sir, if you could find it in your heart to pardon the inconveniences I’ve imposed upon the court, I should want to leave the items in my satchel and the kitsuryou to your honor’s safekeeping.”

“Is that so?” The judge slapped his knees. “You are indeed a young girl familiar with the ways of the world. We shall set aside the complaint. Any resemblance between your goods and the aforementioned catalog of items is declared purely coincidental. It would of course be untenable to take them into custody if they were the property of the Imperial Kyou, but as they are yours by declaration, I do not see a problem.”

“They are mine,” Shoukei stated, flashing an understanding smile at the judge and court officials.

“Understood. You shall be released upon your own recognizance. The court hereby takes into custody the kitsuryou and the remainder of your personal goods. Your bags and purse shall be returned to you. You are free to go.”

“I thank the court.”

Shoukei bowed her head, hiding the emotions that flooded to her face.

Shoukei collected her bags and purse from the bailiff and staggered down the freezing, windswept street.

I’m saved.

She had not only been spared her life but would not be sent back to Kyou. Her hard-won treasures, however, had been stolen out from under her, along with the kitsuryou. And that wasn’t all.

Shoukei put her hand into her pocket and found there her much lighter purse. The hairpin she’d given to the inn had been confiscated. When returning the purse to her, the bailiff said that her account at the inn had been settled with the contents of her purse.

But being left penniless was many times better than being sent back to Kyou,

or so she told herself as she adjusted her leather overcoat and wrapped her shawl around her neck.

But what do I do now?"

In her bags she had a change of clothes and some jewelry she had bought the other day. If she hocked it for cash, how much further could she go? In order to get to Kei, she'd have to go to Tai and get her hands on a passport. But to get to Tai she'd have to board a boat from Ryuu bound for Tai. And she didn't have enough to cover her travel expenses for more than five days.

What if she traveled on foot and stayed in the cheapest inns? And if that didn't work, she'd have to travel while groveling for free lodging along the way, begging for day labor, and generally relying on the kindness of strangers. It wasn't something she had ever believed she could do.

At a complete loss as to what to do, Shoukei exited through the gates of the town hall, hanging her head.

"So you're all right then," a voice called out to her.

Shoukei looked up in surprise and saw the rat there holding the reins of the splendid suugu. "You . . ."

"I was wondering how things turned out and came over to see how you were doing. It looks like you cleared everything up."

"Not necessarily."

Shoukei spun around and walked off in the other direction. The sound of footsteps soon came pattering after her.

"Not necessarily?"

"I paid a bribe and all was forgiven. Meaning they took everything I had." Shoukei spat on the street. There was no sense in taking it out on the rat but the happy-go-lucky expression on his face irritated her.

"Strange," he said in a low voice. Shoukei turned to him. He said, "To think that the government officials of Ryuu would even make such demands."

"These ones did. There's nothing unusual about it. In every world and every kingdom there are people who brandish power to line their own pockets."

"But Ryuu is renown for its constitutional government. The Imperial Hou also tried to emulate Ryuu in the creation of the national polity."

Shoukei stopped walking.

"Far more laws were promulgated disciplining the bureaucracy than the citizenry, though Hou differed a bit in the actual implementation. The public servants of Ryuu should not act corruptly. Laws forbid it. And you're saying that a county court judge so brazenly asked for a bribe? It does all begin to make sense."

"What does?"

"That the system charged with monitoring the bureaucracy is itself breaking down. Shoukei, you said you wanted to go to Tai? And you intended to depart from a port in Ryuu?"

Shoukei laughed derisively. "I don't have enough money to travel directly to Kei."

"I would advise against it."

"Why?"

Amidst the hustle and bustle of traffic headed toward the main gate, the rat lowered his voice. "Youma are appearing in the Kyokai."

"I heard that yesterday."

"Half of them are coming from Tai, but the other half are coming from the shores of Ryuu."

"What?"

Shoukei stopped again and looked at the hanjuu. His black eyes looked back at her. He said, "Ryuu is on the decline."

Shoukei thought this over for a minute. The Imperial Ryuu had ruled his country longer than the Imperial Kyou. Already, his reign had passed a hundred and twenty years. He was said to be an enlightened monarch. Shoukei had always thought of the nearest three kingdoms, Han, Kyou and Ryuu, as inviolable. These had been stable kingdoms since the time she was born.

“So what’s your next step?”

Suddenly asked this question, Shoukei turned to face Rakushun. Without really knowing what she was doing, she stepped out of the pedestrian traffic moving along the street.

“My next step?”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to go to Tai? And all your stuff got ripped off. So you’ve got no travel money, right? I’m going to wander around Ryuu for a bit and then return to En. If that’s okay with you, want to come along?”

Shoukei gaped at him. “You’re kidding me. You mean, take me to En?”

“To Kankyuu, if you don’t mind. But you’ll have to hoof it for a while.”

“Are you stupid? Didn’t I almost get you framed for theft?”

Rakushun laughed. “Not at all. I didn’t think I was going to be charged. The endorsements on my visa do carry a bit of weight.”

“That’s not the problem.”

He laughed again. “These kinds of fortuitous encounters seem to be my destiny.”

Chapter 32

[8-2] The new year began.

In half a month, Suzu and Seishuu had come to Shisui Prefecture at the western fringes of Wa Province. If they kept on along this road, heading west, they would enter Eishuu, home province of the capital Gyouten.

They'd covered this much ground in a fortnight by horse cart. Nevertheless, they'd only gotten this far because Seishuu's condition had worsened markedly. No matter what she did, his difficulties began as soon as he woke up. Sometimes he would spend half the day in pain. On such days, and often the next, they couldn't really travel.

Midway through their journey, they welcomed in the New Year.

Seishuu's eyes hadn't improved. His vertigo was as bad as before, making it difficult for him to travel on foot. His headaches began to be accompanied by convulsions and then by vomiting.

"Sorry, Suzu."

He was lying in the bed of a swaying horse cart. The tarp over the wagon covered the bed of the cart. When they had the room, farmers in the outlying villages made a bit of money giving rides to people walking along the road. Officials traveled in stagecoaches, but they were reserved for the wealthy, and didn't give rides to people like Suzu.

"How's the money holding out? I could walk if we had to. Though not very fast."

"We're doing okay. You don't need to worry about such things." Suzu gave him a playful rap on the forehead.

Seishuu laughed and then pouted, "Don't treat me like a pissant little kid."

His smiling face was drawn and thin. He was sick so often that he couldn't keep anything down. The way he spoke was strange as well. Because Suzu was a wizard, she could understand everything he said. To everybody else, like the

horse cart driver, he only spoke gibberish. His condition had reached the stage where words like “go” and “listen” were the only intelligible things they heard.

“If you’ve got the time to waste mouthing off then go to sleep.”

“I do worry, Suzu. You can be so unreliable.”

“Oh, shut up,” she said, but had to smile. She no longer got angry when he needled her. There was no malice in his words. It’s true that sometimes people would say things that would set him off as well. When he’d talk about the bad shape he was in, it was easier to tell him, “Oh, no, you’re not.”

Suzu looked at Seishuu. “Perhaps it was like that for Riyou-sama as well.”

“What was?”

“Everybody at the manor hated her. But when asked, nobody ever said they did. We’d all shake our heads and say the exact opposite. Still, Riyou would always have some sarcastic comeback.”

“Nobody likes to be told people don’t like them. At the same time, nobody likes to be told that they’re liked when they know they aren’t.”

“In that case, it’s better if you’re not a disagreeable person to start with.”

“Yeah,” said Seishuu, staring up at the tarp tented over the bed of the cart. “People will be irritating. People will get under your skin. People know they shouldn’t do stuff like that, but you know they will.”

“Yeah, they will.”

“At times, it may occur to them that they did in fact do something wrong. If they then ask if there are people who don’t like them, and they’re plainly told that there aren’t, obviously they’re not going to be satisfied. Even if they’re told that there are, they’re not going to like it.”

“Maybe not.”

“If things keep going on in that vein, in ways that they don’t understand themselves, they’ll insist that you tell them what you *really* think. I think a lot of people come to feel that way.”

Suzu gave him a surprised look. “I sounds like you know what’s it like to be

Riyou-sama.”

“It’s not hard to imagine.”

“I guess not.”

When she thought back about it now, she had never tried to imagine what it must have been like to be Riyou. She only thought about what a mean bitch she was.

“Honestly, I never gave a moment’s thought to how Riyou-sama felt. Putting up with her was enough. It’s hard to imagine it also frustrated and rankled Riyou and that’s what made her so cynical. When she couldn’t stomach what you said, she’d heap a lot of unpleasant chores on your back. The only place you could catch your breath was in your own bed. Even then, she’d wake you up at all hours.”

Seishuu sighed. “That really is sad.”

“It was awful.”

“Not you, Suzu. You were there because you chose to be there. That’s not true of Riyou.”

Suzu gave him a reproachful glare. “You’re not me. Are you saying you feel sorry for her?”

“Isn’t it a pain always having to be a stickin-the-mud like that? It looks like you ended up hating yourself too. Sure must suck being you. But the problem is, you can never run away from yourself.”

“I suppose,” Suzu said peevishly, looking the other way. She lifted a corner of the tarp and glanced out at the road. “It may sound funny to you, but it really was tough. It’s sad to think that my happiest moments were when I could crawl into a freezing bed on winter nights and have all my own thoughts to myself.”

“There were other people, weren’t there? You never thought of talking to them?”

“I did. But me being a kaikyaku, most people didn’t understand me. They’d laugh at me every time I’d ask about something I didn’t know. So I lost interest. To be sure, it was bad of me not to try and learn stuff myself. But when people

are always laughing at you and don't want to learn anything about you, pretty soon you stop trying."

"So you'd lie in you bed and tell yourself how pitiful you were, how you were the unluckiest girl in the whole world, and cry yourself to sleep."

"That's not . . ." she started to say. But it *was*, she realized, blushing at the truth. "I didn't do that. I thought about lots of things. Like, how it was all a dream and when I opened my eyes again I'd be lying in my real bed at home."

She laughed wistfully. "After I found out about the Imperial Kei, I'd dream about what kind of person she was. I was sure that she must be homesick for Yamato too. I'd imagine us getting together and talking like we are now, and me telling her all about my hometown."

The Imperial Kei would be so happy to have someone to talk to and would tell her all about where she was from too.

Suzu let out a breath. "But when I woke up, I was right back in the same place. Riyuu was as unpleasant as ever, working us to the bone, and everybody was mean to me all the time."

Seishuu gave her an exasperated look. "Suzu, you do carry on like a little kid. What did you expect? You never do anything for yourself."

Suzu's eyes flew open in disbelief. Seishuu answered with a tired sigh. "Daydreams sure don't take any effort. Compared to the problems in front of your face and the things that have got to be done, daydreams are a lot easier. But you're just putting off till tomorrow the things you got to do right now. So nothing changes, nothing gets decided, nothing gets settled."

"That is true."

"Keep on like this, with your head stuck up in the clouds, and you'll never grow up, Suzu."

"You know, there are times when you really are a pain."

Bleah, said Seishuu, sticking his tongue out at her. He curled into a ball. "You're always so weepy, Suzu. I can't stand it."

"Sorry I'm such a crybaby. I think it's because I never cried when I was little. I

was a very long-suffering kid.” The man who bought her from her family and led her to the mountain pass said so, too. He said how he appreciated that she didn’t get all teary-eyed. “A lot of hard times after that turned me into a crybaby.”

Seishuu looked at her. “Our home in Kei got burned down and most of the people in our village killed. We had to leave. Before we left, we went to see the burned-down ruins of our house and everybody cried up a storm. It was so sad we couldn’t stand it. Because we were kids, we cried all the time. It wasn’t like normal crying. It was like we were never going to stop crying for the rest of our lives.”

“Even you?”

“Even me. At least I thought so at the time. The way I see it, there’s two kinds of crying. People cry because they feel so sorry for themselves. And people cry because they’re sad. People who feel sorry for themselves are like children who want something done for them. They want their big brother or mother or next door neighbor to help them.”

Suzu just looked at him.

“It’s because, in situations like this, children don’t have any way of protecting themselves. That’s why I say they cry like children.”

“Huh,” Suzu replied. Seishuu didn’t speak for a while. She said, “Seishuu, where did your family live in Kei?”

“In the south.”

“When you’re feeling better, why don’t we go check it out?”

“Together?”

Seishuu uncurled himself. He had all of Suzu’s clothes wrapped around him. The horse cart was cold, and he was covered up all the way to his nose. He peered at her with his eyes only.

She said, “You don’t want to?”

“Going anywhere with you is such a pain in the ass, Suzu.”

He grinned. Suzu laughed.

Chapter 33

[8-3] The town of Kokei was adjacent to the city of Hokui, appended to its northeast corner. The only government office was the town hall. The other buildings belonged to the twenty-five households. It was the smallest size of an incorporated city.

Youko and Rangyoku passed through the gate of the rike and onto Main Street. Most towns were surrounded by a tall stockade a hundred yards in every direction. The small houses circled the inside the wall. The town hall, Rishi, and rike were located in a row in the northern sector of the town. The Main Street ran east-to-west in front of them. The street running north-south from the Rishi to the main gate was the Center Street.

The town hall housed the government offices and the elementary school. The Rishi was the official town shrine where the riboku and the gods were enshrined. A common configuration was for the state shrines of the Gods of the Earth and Gods of Five Grains to be located along the western wall and the ancestral shrines along the eastern wall. But the faith of the townspeople was focused on the riboku. Because it was through the riboku that children were bestowed and livestock were granted.

"Very interesting," Youko said to herself.

Rangyoku leaned toward her. "What is?"

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking about the Rishi. It seems like the state and ancestral shrines were tossed in as an afterthought, a sort of consolation prize."

In fact, the state and ancestral shrines were small and mostly just sat there gathering dust.

Rangyoku giggled. "You do say the most curious things, Youshi."

"I do?"

"The riboku brings children. No matter how many offerings you bring, or how many prayers you pray, the harvest won't necessarily be plentiful and you won't necessarily be protected from calamities. So the riboku is always first in our

minds. That's bound to be the case no matter what, don't you think?"

"You're a very pragmatic people, that's for sure. But Tentei—the Lord God Creator—and Seioubo—Queen Mother of the West—are different."

Tentei and Seioubo were often enshrined together in the Rishi. There were also districts in the town set aside for shrines dedicated to them.

"That's because they're the ones that give you children."

"Tentei and Seioubo?"

"Yes. A couple who wants a child prays to the riboku and ties a ribbon to a branch of the tree."

"And if you're not married, you can't?"

"Nope. The Amanuensis records the names of all the people who want a child and sends it to the Queen Mother of the West. She makes a request to the Tentei, who chooses the most suitable of them to receive a child. Then Seioubo commands the goddesses to create a *ranka*."

"Huh." It struck her as quite different from any of the old fairy tales she'd heard back in Japan. Not that she could remember them with any great detail.

"The Internuncio implants the seed that will become the child inside the ranka, and then bears the ranka to the riboku. Isn't that how they do it in Yamato?"

"Not at all." Youko said slyly, "Do you believe all of it, Rangyoku? What you just told me?"

Rangyoku laughed. "Not literally. But a ranka does appear. And if a ranka doesn't appear on the branch you chose, you just can't go pick one from somewhere else. It won't come off. Amazing, isn't it? That's why it's got to be what God gave to you."

"Of course," Youko smiled. "Livestock are also born on the riboku, right?"

"Yes. From the first of the month to the seventh, petitions are made to the riboku. The first day is for birds like chickens and ducks. The second day is for dogs. The third day is for sheep and goats. The fourth day is for boars and pigs. The fifth day is for cattle, and the sixth for horses. The seventh day is for people."

"People? There are days designated for people?"

"Yeah. On the seventh or any day after the ninth. Children requested on the seventh are supposed to turn out the best. My mom said that Keikei was."

"I see."

"Livestock germinate in a month. You can tie many ribbons at once but not all of them will necessarily grow a ranka. For people, it's always only one."

"So you don't have twins?"

"Twins?"

"When two children are born at the same time? In Yamato, as many as five children have been born at the same time."

"Wow, that's weird." Rangyoku looked back over her shoulder at the Rishi. "The eighth day is for crops. But only the empress can make such requests."

"You can grow the five grains [wheat, rice, beans, and kinds of millet] whenever you want yourself just by planting the seeds. When they bear fruit, you get more seeds, right?"

"That would seem to be the case."

"Plants and trees aren't animals. But not just anybody can make requests for new grain stocks. Only the empress can do that, at a tree in the Imperial Palace. When Heaven grants the request and the tree bears fruit, the next year, a ranka containing those seeds can grow on every riboku in the kingdom."

Youko opened her eyes wide with surprise. This certainly was news to her. She'd have to ask Enho to fill her in on the details.

"*Yaboku*, the wild riboku, grow animals other than livestock and domesticated birds. Did you know there are trees in the water, too?"

"I didn't. For fish, I imagine?"

Rangyoku smiled. "Exactly. And then *yaboku* for wild grasses and trees."

"Plants other than grains just grow on their own?"

"They do. Otherwise there wouldn't be any new plants and trees. So it seems like they can do it all by themselves. When and where new grasses are born

nobody knows. So now and then people examine the base of yaboku to see if any unfamiliar plants are growing there. If there are, then bring them home and grow them. There are itinerants who do that for a living. They're called *husbandry hunters*. They go around searching for new ranka. It also seems to depend on the riboku. There are trees that produce a lot wild species, and those that don't at all. The ones that do are kept secret. No one will talk about them. Hunters will kill people who try to follow them."

"Huh."

"You can gather unusual medicines and herbs and saplings for new crops and sell them but it sounds like a scary business."

Youko nodded in agreement. Of course, people were discriminated against in this world as well. There wasn't much discrimination based on occupation because vocations weren't inherited along family lines. No matter what family a child came from, he would get a partition when he turned twenty. A big business or enterprise couldn't be inherited by the children. The disabled were also treated with compassion. But the world was closed off to hanjuu and itinerants.

"What is it?" Rangyoku asked.

Youko shook her head.

Her friend was a hanjuu. In gratefulness to him, she wished to repeal all the laws that held hanjuu back. The ministers refused to go along. She considered it for her Inaugural Rescript but that didn't sit right with her. The Inaugural Rescript was supposed to make a statement. Without really being aware of it, she had become seized with the conviction that she should carry out her first official duties with all the self-confidence and gravity of an empress.

"Did I say something bad?"

"No, of course not. Just something that's been on my mind of late. Ah, here we are."

She and Rangyoku came to the town gate. Rangyoku had to leave for the grazing grounds. Youko had a task in Hokui.

"Well, cheer up, okay?"

Youko smiled. No doubt, Rangyoku assumed that her dolefulness was caused by thoughts of her homeland. Appreciative of such sentiments, Youko waved and headed west on the loop road.

Towns usually had only one main gate. Kokei had two. That's because Kokei had originally been a part of Hokui.

The town was definitely the nucleus of the city. The city offices were originally located in an extension of the town hall. When the city became a county seat, the tables were turned. The government offices were moved to the city center and the essential services of the town were relegated to a block in the northeast corner of the city. Hokui was pushing the town right out of the city. At this point, there was no more than a single gate connecting them.

Youko entered Hokui and headed straight for the city hall in the center of the city. She followed the loop road around the city center until she found herself facing the southeast quadrant of the city.

"Where is it?" she muttered to herself.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the street, right at her heels, a small voice said, "Turn right at the next corner."

Following the directions, Youko moved deeper into the city and arrived at a tiny house. Originally, the only homeowners were residents of the town who had been given the property by the kingdom. But in reality, people sold their land and houses and moved around. One person sold his homestead and acquired property or a shop from the city comptroller. Another person bought the land and hired tenant farmers to work any number of homesteads. One way or another, an entire hamlet would end up as the private domain of a single owner. Not a few individuals sold out without even seeing their own land grants and went looking for housing in the city.

The owner of this house had come to live there through a tangled series of events. At any rate, his name was Rou. This was the house of the man who served Enho's strange visitor.

Hankyo had tailed him and confirmed that the man had not gone to an inn but to the house of this Rou. The next day, the man had left Hokui and headed north.

And now what?

Youko looked up at the house. If she called the man out and demanded to know who his guest was, she was unlikely to get an answer. She was watching from the opposite side of the street when the front gate abruptly opened. Youko averted her gaze and pretended she'd dropped something on the road.

"All right, then," a man's voice said.

"The package—" He stopped in mid-sentence, as if he'd just noticed her standing there. He was small, middle-aged man with calico hair. Next to him was a man as big as he was small, with a boulder-sized physique and plain black hair. He looked at Youko and then away.

"It's up to you."

"I understand."

With that simple exchange, the two parted. The smaller man all but ran back inside the house. The big man started off down the avenue with quick steps.

Just an ordinary visitor perhaps.

But she couldn't ignore the way the smaller man had suddenly stopped talking.

Youko walked away in the opposite direction from the big man. Under her breath she beckoned Hankyo.

"Does his presence concern you to such a degree?"

Youko nodded at the disembodied voice. "Sorry about this, but if you would. He may be an ordinary visitor but I'd like to get to the bottom his connection to Enho."

Just as Rangyoku predicted, Enho had been highly agitated after the visitor came and canceled their studies. And so with time on her hands, she'd come to see Rou's house for herself.

"By your command."

The small voice faded and disappeared.

That night, Hankyo returned past midnight and reported that man owned property in the city of Takuhou, Shisui Prefecture, just across the river in Wa

Province.

“Takuhou?”

The city of Takuhou was to the east of Hokui. The man who had visited Enho had headed north. Was there even any connection between them?

Youko silently turned these facts over in her mind.

Part IX

Chapter 34

[9-1] He was born in Kou, Rakushun explained as they traveled along. “But in Kou, a hanjuu can’t even get into elementary school. So I moved to En.” A hanjuu couldn’t be matriculated in Hou either. When Shoukei pointed this out, he nodded.

“Neither are itinerants and refugees. If you aren’t listed on the census, you’re out of luck. A lot of kingdoms are that way. Kou used to be the only kingdom that didn’t list hanjuu on the census. In the past, that was true everywhere. In Tai, the new emperor was apparently about to revise the census laws. Before he could get the job done he was usurped by a pretender.”

“Oh.”

“In Hou and Kou, hanjuu can’t become public servants and aren’t admitted to university. And for the most part, Shun and Kei.”

Rakushun’s itinerary took him hither and yon, with no great design in mind. Going by suugu, it wouldn’t take more than a day to get to Shisou, so they stopped at cities along the way. They often took detours to see cities in the opposite direction of Shisou. With the suugu it was a trouble-free trip, but Shoukei couldn’t help wondering what he was up to and what the whole purpose of the trip was.

“More kingdoms don’t allow itinerants or refugees to become public servants or go to school. It’s even tougher for sankyaku and kaikyaku. They’re normally treated the same as itinerants. In Kou they’re treated even worse than that. At the other extreme, there are kingdoms that treat them very well, Sou and En and Ren. Sankyaku and kaikyaku can tell you fascinating things about paper making, ceramics, printing techniques, medicine.”

“Sankyaku and kaikyaku actually exist?” Shoukei had never seen one.

“The first one to build a temple was in Hou.”

“Really?”

“A sankyaku arrived during the reign of the Late Emperor Hitsu. He carved away the side of a mountain and built a temple. That was the first time the teachings of Buddhism were promulgated. That’s why cremation is still practiced in Hou. Only Hou, En, Sou and Ren cremate the dead. In Hou, Rishi don’t follow the same layout as the Imperial Court, but are built like temples. The arrangement of the buildings is different.”

“Emperor Hitsu?”

The twelfth or thirteenth dynasty of Hou, I believe.”

Shoukei looked at the hanjuu in amazement. He knew more about Hou than the princess royal, a citizen of Hou. It was both mortifying and irritating.

“By the way, Shoukei, starting tomorrow, things are going to get a bit tougher.”

They had left Shisou and traveled two more days on the suugu. They were about to enter the gates to a city. The road before the gate was quiet. It was still some time till sundown. Rakushun tied a small bamboo tube to the neck of the suugu. That morning, Shoukei had seen him place a letter into the tube.

“What’s that for?”

“Starting tomorrow, we’ll proceed on foot to En.” She was about to protest, when Rakushun sent the suugu on its way. “Go on ahead of us and see that this letter gets to its destination.”

With a cry, the suugu climbed into the air. It soared skyward like a kite, waved its long tail, swept over them like the wind, and disappeared.

“Well, what are we going to do now, with the suugu gone? It’s still some ways to En!”

“About five days. Sorry. We won’t be doing any more sightseeing.”

“That’s not the problem! Where are we going to stay tonight?”

Hanjuu weren’t welcome in any city. Whenever he entered a high-class establishment, Rakushun was met with sour looks. But when they saw the suugu, their attitudes would change just like that. Without the suugu, they

wouldn't hesitate to show him the door.

"It's okay. We won't stay in those kinds of inns. The kitsuryou's not around to fuss about the stables so any old dive will suit us fine."

Until now, they had stayed at the best hotels because it was necessary for the inn to have stables that could care for a suugu. Although she understood this, Shoukei frantically ran after Rakushun. He'd already started for the gate.

"You can't be serious! Any old dive? You're kidding, right?"

Rakushun blinked. "About what?"

"What do you mean, about what?"

"What does it matter where you sleep? Though I'm not exactly thrilled at the prospect of sharing a room with you."

"Not even a canopy bed? Some dirty closet of a room?"

Rakushun paused at the gate and sighed. "You really did have a pampered upbringing. No worries. The beds may be hard, but not so narrow that you're going to fall out of bed. Or there will be a wooden floor. You should be able to get to sleep."

"I know that," Shoukei spat back. "That's why I can't stand it. I don't want to sleep in a place like that ever again."

Any reminder of that mean and shabby life made her miserable. Having stayed only in the finest hotels after fleeing Kyou, the thought was all the more unbearable.

Rakushun scratched at the fluffy fur beneath his ear. The main street of the small town was as quiet as the highway. "Well, yes, people usually sleep in beds. But there are people who sleep on the floor. There are people who sleep on the ground."

"That's hardly news to me."

"In your case, that's all it is. News."

Shoukei drew her eyebrows together. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"To you, it's simply something you *know*. Unfortunately, I suspect you have no

idea what it is really like.”

“Well, I wasn’t kidding. I slept in a bed in a cold, drafty room, under a threadbare quilt. You may not realize it but I hate even thinking about those times.”

“Why?

“Why?” Shoukei responded in amazement and disgust. “Don’t you know how miserable a life that was? Getting woken up at the crack of dawn, sent off to work before breakfast, coming home covered in mud and dung and straw. Never enough to eat. Going to bed exhausted, not being able to sleep because you’re starving and cold. After a few winks getting woken up the next morning and sent off to work all over again. Everybody makes fun of you and talks down to you. I don’t want to remember any of that life. You get it now?”

“Sorry, but not at all. Why so bad? Why deem it such a wretched existence? It is the life of all peasants. When you’re poor, you go hungry. That shouldn’t be news to you. But why can’t you bear to be reminded of it? That’s what I don’t understand.”

Rakushun stopped and glanced to his right. “How about there?”

It was a small inn that would hardly rank high on anybody’s travel itinerary. Several tables were lined up on the dirt floor of the narrow, one-story storefront. Were it not for the sign advertising rooms, it would have struck her as nothing more than a shabby food stall.

“That? Places like that don’t even have *beds*. In the first place, nobody dressed like me would ever stay at a place like that!”

“If that’s the way you feel, then go buy something else to wear.” Rakushun took a few coins from his pocket and pressed them into her hands. “That’s where I’m staying. You can buy yourself some more appropriate dress or take the money and run. It’s up to you.”

“I—!”

Rakushun wagged his tail at the speechless Shoukei and walked over to the inn. Shoukei watched dumbfounded as he called out to the proprietor. With this amount of money, she could only afford the meanest quality of clothing, the kind

of plain garb she'd worn at the orphanage, and only secondhand at best. In this winter weather, there wasn't anything she really needed other than a coat or jacket. But she'd have to sell her silk outfits to buy those kinds of clothes. And that meant going back to the way she was before.

But, Shoukei thought, she had no money of her own. If Rakushun abandoned her here, she'd end up selling her clothes anyway. And even then, it was hardly likely she'd have enough to take her all the way to En. Eating the cheapest food in the cheapest inns, could she even make it to the border?

Live with it, she told herself. But when she thought of returning to wretched life of a girl on the lam, she wanted to weep. Continuing on in this state, in the company of a hanjuu, and no *suugu* to boot, was simply infuriating.

She swallowed her pride and went looking for a used apparel shop. She picked out a change of clothes. When the pedestrian outfit was ready to her satisfaction, only her shoes were out of character. She'd sold off everything down to there. The only thing she hadn't purchased was peasant-grade footwear. So now her shoes didn't match. At any rate, the only thing left to do was go behind the screen in the shop and change.

Pulling on the starchy garments, she wanted to cry. *Right now in Kei, a girl is draped in a luxurious silk kimono of the most amazing quality, wearing a brocaded, embroidered fur coat heavy with pearls.*

Biting her lip, she returned to the inn. It was mortifying enough to have to tell the proprietor that she was with the hanjuu, and just as miserable being shown down the moldy old hallway.

"Here," he said, abruptly.

When she opened the door, there was the hanjuu, sitting nonchalantly on the floor in front of a brazier. He looked at Shoukei and scratched his ear. "I don't understand girls. What's so embarrassing about going into a rundown inn wearing silk clothes?"

"You're the one who gave me the money and told me to."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd actually change into them. Well, that's what you should wear from now on. That's about the class of travel we'll be engaged in."

"It stinks." Shoukei sullenly sat down on the floor.

Rakushun gazed at the brazier. "No matter how many times you say it, it doesn't change the fact that *that's* how most people get by. How inconvenient bringing up a princess must be."

"Inconvenient?"

"Inconvenient to treat the ordinary as extraordinary. As surely as you get used to luxurious attire, you start to think that *that* kind of clothing, as you put it, stinks. So you want to wear silk. You're not the only one who thinks that way. Every girl wants to wear beautiful silk clothes and live a dressed-up life. Perhaps it's in their nature. Who wouldn't want to live the life of a empress or princess?"

"Well, unfortunately, not everybody is a princess."

"No, indeed. But *you* are."

"I'm—" *not the princess royal*, Shoukei started to say, but Rakushun wagged his tail. "You *are* the princess royal. That fact notwithstanding, I'm not saying this with any ulterior motive in mind. The people of Hou sure didn't like you, though."

"Why?"

"I've met my fair share of refugees from Hou. They all hated the late emperor. Not a one of them had a good word for you. You are a very unpopular person."

"It wasn't my fault!" Shoukei shouted. She couldn't for the life of her understand what everybody had against her.

"It *is* your fault. Because you were the princess royal."

"Because of my father."

"Your father became emperor. So you became princess royal. That, indeed, was not your fault. But when a man becomes emperor, the mantle of responsibility falls upon his shoulders, and upon the shoulders of the princess as well, like it or not."

Shoukei gaped at the rounded back of the rat.

"There are two kingdoms with a princess or prince, Ryuu and Sou. The empress

of Sai had a son, but he died before her coronation. The prince of Ryuu is a minister of state, working on behalf of the kingdom. The prince and princess of Sou also assist the emperor. The princess is the director of the national health service. Before, the sick were treated at homes and the doctor visited them there. Nowadays, they are admitted to a hospital where doctors can care for them. That system was initiated by the princess royal of Sou. So, tell me, Shoukei, what did you do?"

"What?" Caught off guard by the question, Shoukei stared at him.

"There once was a princess who remonstrated with her faltering emperor and was killed for it. And the word is that after the emperor of Kou died, the princess of Kou and her brother joined the work brigades along with everybody else. The kingdom collapsed and they could do nothing to stop it. So they took responsibility. They volunteered. Until the next emperor is chosen, they'll work to save their ravaged country. So, what did you do?"

"But . . . my father never asked me to do anything."

"You're missing the premise of the question. That is something you should have addressed."

"But . . ."

"You knew nothing? Nothing of what the princesses in other kingdoms were doing?"

"I didn't know!"

"Then you should have informed yourself. I know Hou better than Shoukei, the princess royal of Hou. Don't you find that more embarrassing than your tattered wardrobe?"

"But . . ." she started to say and swallowed the rest. She didn't know what to say next.

"Does wearing wool embarrass you? Most people in the world wear wool. No one should be embarrassed to wear the best that their hard work could afford them. Then there are those who do no work and wear silk. Nobody much cares for them. Nobody likes a freeloader who, without raising a finger, gets something they could never afford with a lifetime of labor. That should be

obvious. If you know someone who got all that you had lost without an ounce of effort, you'd resent her, wouldn't you?"

Shoukei shut her mouth to keep from saying anything. In fact, there was a certain empress whom she deeply resented.

"Something you've been given through no effort of your own demands nothing of you in turn. You never understood that. Hence your resentment."

Shoukei struck the floor with her fist. "So you're saying that everything is my fault? Everything happened because I was bad!" She couldn't admit that. Neither did she want to. "My father never asked me to do a thing! My mother said the same thing! What was I supposed to do? They didn't let me go to university. I didn't have the chance to learn anything. And that's all my fault? There are lots of people like that, lots of people who live rich and comfortable lives. Why does it all have to come down on me?"

"We rightfully reap what we rightfully sow. To profit otherwise is a mistake. And hiding behind misbegotten gains fools no one."

"But!"

"You had mountains of silk dresses, didn't you? You could be said to be an expert on silk dresses, couldn't you? But do you have any idea how all that finery came to be? Did you ever stop to think how much labor it took or why it was given to you in the first place? Why the servants wore hand-spun garments and you wore silk? Until you understand *that*, you won't understand anything, this is what I'm saying."

"I don't what to hear it!" Shoukei threw herself on the floor and covered her ears. "Just shut up already!"

Chapter 35

[9-2] “Let’s go.”

At Rakushun’s urging, Shoukei picked up her things. The night before, he had left her to cry herself to sleep. He woke her up that morning. In the tavern, she warmed her chilled body with a bowl of gruel and they left. He said nothing. She kept her thoughts to herself.

They left the city on foot, and pressed on toward the east. The snow was not as heavy in Ryuu as Hou. A sharp, cold wind blew instead. It was the coldest time of the year. If she didn’t keep a thick wool muffler wrapped halfway up her face, small icicles would form at the end of her nose. If she didn’t keep her hair covered, it would turn to a sheet of ice.

Many people traveled by horse cart. The bed of the wagon would be packed with straw and rags and covered with a thick tarp. Along with the heat from a brazier, they shared the warmth along with your fellow travelers. Farmers from the neighboring communities hired out their wagons while their fields lay fallow. Hou had a similar system. In her home country, they used horse-drawn sledges not wagons.

“So where do you hail from?”

The travelers they rode with were often girls and old women. Healthy men walked alongside on the highway. The girl sitting next Shoukei asked the question.

Shoukei hugged the *onjaku* to her chest. “Hou,” she said. The *onjaku* was a round metal container filled with hot coals. The surface was etched with a lattice of small slits and ridges and the interior was packed with steel wool. This kind of simple *onjaku* was hung around the neck and kept you warm when you go out in the winter.

“Hou isn’t doing well. The emperor was overthrown.”

“Ah . . . yeah.”

Wrapped in the heavy canvas, the dim interior of the wagon was lit by a single

lamp.

"How about you, child?" she said to Rakushun. Beneath the heavy muffler, Shoukei laughed to herself.

"I was born in Kou."

"Oh, didn't the emperor of Kou die last year? Three years ago it was Hou and the year before last the empress of Kei died. Tai is in that condition now. These are unsettled times."

"Ryuu is doing well. The emperor is very long-lived."

"Yes," the girl laughed. "Not as long-lived as the emperor of En. But longer than Kou or Hou, so we count ourselves blessed."

Shoukei instead thought of what she'd seen along the way. She'd assumed that it was a wealthy kingdom. The landscape was more desolate than she'd expected. There were hardly any tall buildings. The cities spread out over the land as if clinging to the earth.

When she interrupted to ask about this, the girl and the other travelers laughed. "The houses of Ryuu are in the earth. The winters are long and the summers cool, so we burrow into the ground. Rich or poor, all houses are big."

She said that aside from the rain-drenched northeast and the Kyokai shoreline, houses in Ryuu had large rooms underground. Because of the cold climes, the kingdom did not have large-scale industry, but was rich in stone. They quarried stone, built their houses underground, connected the sub-basements together, and even tunneled out small underground roads.

"Wow." Shoukei didn't know anything about the other kingdoms. She had never left Hou before. She hadn't associated with the citizens of other kingdoms. She'd spent her life confined to the Imperial Palace, with no interest in what was going on in the world around her. The whole idea of underground roads fascinated her.

"What if the air goes bad? Doesn't it get stuffy in there?"

"Oh, the ventilation takes care of it."

"But there's no sunlight down there. Isn't it awfully dark?"

"There are skylights. In Ryuu, the courtyards of houses extend down into the ground. The light radiates out from there. It's not dark and gloomy at all. The rooms clustered around the courtyard are very comfortable."

"And the tunnels?"

"The tunnels are built on the same principle. Haven't you seen them? For the larger tunnels, the long narrow skylights run down the center of the main thoroughfare."

Now that she thought about it, Shoukei recalled seeing the narrow shed-like structures running down the middle of the road. Yet they didn't have roofs. She'd wondered what they were.

"Those are the skylights? What about rain? Doesn't water collect in there?"

The girl smiled. "It doesn't rain much there."

Shoukei nodded and looked at Rakushun. "Did that have any underground rooms?"

"The underground rooms aren't for the lodgers. They're for the innkeeper and his family. That's because Ryuu levies a tax based on how large the underground part of the building is. Add a business surcharge on top of that and it can get quite costly."

"Hey, kid, you know a lot."

Rakushun awkwardly scratched at his ear. The girl paid no attention to his reaction and smiled at him. "Ryuu is a good place. We don't grow a lot of wheat but we have a lot of mines and quarries and gemstone fountains. And lumber. We really have been blessed."

"There are mines in Hou too. What about raising livestock?"

"We do. But there's not a lot of good grazing. Don't you have good horses in Hou?"

"And cattle and sheep. Lots of those."

"We raise them in Ryuu too, though not that many. We can't grow enough forage in the summer. Still, we do pretty well for ourselves. Our emperor's a good person, too. The winters are real bad, though."

"It really is cold. I didn't expect it."

"People say it's better than Tai. They say that if you go outside at night, your nose will freeze half off. Even during the day, if you don't cover your face, your nose will get frostbit."

"Huh," Shoukei exclaimed. "There are so many different kingdoms. I wasn't aware."

She thought they were all like Hou, closed in during the winter by the snows that melted in the summer and watered the green seas of grass.

The girl looked at Rakushun. "Is it true that you can sleep outside during the winter in the south? That you can harvest wheat twice a year?"

Rakushun waved his hand. "Yes, you can harvest crops twice in a year. But that doesn't mean you can sleep outside in the winter. Though in Sou, the southernmost of the kingdoms, that might be possible."

Shoukei blurted out, "The winters in Kei are probably warm."

"I wonder," the girl sighed. "Kei just crowned a new empress. The kingdom seems to be settling down pretty well."

Shoukei had nothing to say in response.

"It must be really tough when a kingdom starts to falter. The refugees from Tai are in a bad way. If your house gets burned down there, you'll surely freeze to death."

"Yeah."

"Tai is in chaos. Recently, youma have shown up near Ryuу. I've never seen one but that's what people say."

Unconsciously, Shoukei found herself looking at Rakushun.

"To make matters worse, the weather has been getting worse. The north has seen record amounts of snow. Smaller towns are completely cut off and there's great concern that famine will set in there. We've got a good emperor, so nobody knows why."

The wagon creaked. The sound struck Shoukei as the creaking of the kingdom

itself. The kingdom was rusting from above. If a county court could be corrupted then everything above must already be rotten to the core. The kingdom was headed on a downward path.

With no emperor upon the throne, a kingdom descended into chaos. Natural disasters continued and the youma rampaged. Homes were lost to fires and floods, people had no way of surviving the winter. Shoukei remembered those cold winters in the orphanage. The weather improved during the summer but locusts devoured the sprouting wheat, leaving the people with nothing to eat. Frost or flood, in either case starvation was not far behind.

This is the kind of chaos Hou has plunged into. A thought that hadn't occurred to her before.

They got out of the wagon at the gates to the city.

"I really don't know a thing," Shoukei confessed as they walked to the inn.

Rakushun didn't contradict her. He said, "But from now on, if there's something you don't know, you need to learn it. I've got no problem with that."

Shoukei stopped. "Better late than never, no?"

There was a great deal she needed to learn, and quickly. About Hou, about the national polity, about other kingdoms, about emperors and empresses, about princesses.

"What you didn't know about being the princess royal of Hou came back to haunt you. That lesson should be pretty well settled by now. True penance is still in the offing, but your life as a human being has only just begun. At this point you're still a toddler. There's no need to hurry it."

"You think so?"

"There are some things in this world that you can never get back. Your life as princess royal is over. There's no reclaiming that piece of the past. Don't you think it'd be better to abandon it completely and consider instead what you did wrong and learn from it?"

"I suppose."

"The trappings of royalty are a stumbling block. In any case, lose the throne

once and it's gone for good. As far as that goes, being an ordinary person is a lot easier. As long as you're still alive, there's always time for second chances."

"Yeah," said Shoukei, looking down at the hanjuu. His soft, charcoal-gray coat looked quite warm to her eyes. His glimmering silver whiskers struck her as quite pretty. "You know, it just occurred to me, but you're probably quite comfortable."

Rakushun laughed. "For now. Come summer and it'll truly get tiresome."

Shoukei laughed softly as well.

Chapter 36

[9-3] “Excuse me, Enho, but would you mind if I took off for today?”

After breakfast, Youko approached Enho as he was leaving for the elementary school.

“Not at all. Where to? Will you be late?”

“I should be home before the gates close. I’m going to Takuhou.”

Enho hiked up his bushy white eyebrows. He leaned forward and said, “Why now, out of the blue like this?”

“I’d like to see the city. Something wrong?”

Enho hesitated for a moment and then shook his head, averting his gaze. “Go ahead, go take a look. It’s fine by me.”

With that cryptic remark, Enho turned and left through the courtyard. Youko scowled as she watched him go, wondering, “What was *that* about?”

Gousui Gorge formed the border between Ei Province and Wa Province. Crossing the rope suspension bridge over the gorge brought her to Shisui Prefecture. It was then a half-day wagon ride to the prefectoral capital, Takuhou.

Youko sat in the back of the wagon and pulled on her jacket. In En, these kinds of suspension bridges were only used on very wide rivers. The river crossings were well organized, ferrying wagons and passengers across the river together. Not in Kei.

There weren’t many bridges in the first place. Bridges over gorges like Gousui were limited to places where there was no place to build a ferry landing. Horse-drawn wagons couldn’t traverse these suspension bridges. Passengers had to disembark on one side and pick up a connecting ride on the other. At least a bridge that could be crossed was better than the alternative. Wider ravines required long detours.

Kei is poor, Youko thought, observing the passengers on the opposing shore waiting for wagons to pick them. Though comparing Kei to En was a pointless

exercise.

Arriving at Takuhou after a half-day's journey, it became clear that the chaos had far more deeply scared the city than Hokui. In Hokui, damaged houses had been torn down and new structures were being built. All around Takuhou, the remains of burned-out and half-wrecked buildings stood abandoned. Rough shacks lined the unreclaimed land outside the city. Sullen-looking groups huddled around open fires, the kind of refugees she never saw in Hokui.

Ei Province was doing very well. The province lord of Ei was the Taiho, Keiki. Additionally, as in Hokui, citizens of the Duchy of Yellow could expect relief from taxes. The stark contrast with Gahou, the ill-reputed province lord of Wa, was plain to see.

She climbed down from the wagon and paid the driver. She passed through the gates, listening to Hankyo's whisperings. Following his directions, she made her way to the southwest corner of the city.

Past a certain street, the rows of houses turned smaller and cruder. Then things got even worse. Hungry children on the street, faces tight with hunger. The listless eyes of adults squatting in patches of sunlight. Unconsciously, Youko found herself taking a tighter hold on the overcoat she carried in her left hand. With her right she gripped the hilt of the sword bundled inside the coat.

There, the hushed voice whispered from her heels.

Youko glanced from one end of the street to the other. Compared to the state of everything else around them, one of the houses was in rather good condition. As expected, anybody wanting to do business in this kind of neighborhood would first want to preserve the reputation of the establishment.

Youko approached the tavern, entered the open doors. Inside were several suspiciously-dressed men, even compared to the type she'd expect to find hanging out in this neighborhood. Their eyes fell on Youko.

"What you want, boy?"

Standing at the back was the man she had seen in Hokui.

"Stopped by to ask for directions. You got a restaurant here?"

The men had already found other things to occupy their attention. A single man came up to her and pulled out a chair at a nearby table.

"Have a seat. You got lost?"

"Looks like it."

Youko sat down in the chair. She felt a sensation creeping up her spine, Jouyuu manifesting himself. Jouyuu was one of Keiki's shirei. He dwelled inside her. He was tensing up. Sensing danger, he was preparing himself and warning her. Though the men at the tables around her had all looked away, she knew they were all focused on her presence.

"Hey, you." The man planted his hand on the table and leaned over her. The thin ring wrapped around his thick, gnarled fingers left a strange impression on her.

"You a girl?"

Youko looked up at him. "And if I am?"

The man laughed. "Ballsy, you are."

"I'll take that as a compliment. This your place?" The man nodded. Youko looked into his eyes and smiled. "Have we met before? In Hokui?"

"No," the man grunted. "Not that I recall."

From the expression on his face, Youko couldn't tell if he didn't remember her or was only pretending he didn't.

"You gotta be kidding, you come to see me?"

"Just had a feeling we'd met before."

Youko didn't pursue the matter further. The man, the tavern, everything about the place was fishy. She was going to have Keiki check out exactly who they were.

"I do recall asking about getting something to eat."

The big man exclaimed in amazement under his breath. He looked down at her with something approaching admiration. "Well, ain't you the plucky one. You got money?"

"Are you telling me this is a pricey place?"

"Pretty damned pricey."

"Well, then," said Youko, standing up. "Perhaps I did come to the wrong place. So, what's the best way to get back to the main street?"

The man took a step forward. "Who are you?"

"A traveler."

"You expect me to believe that? You got way more guts than fits your frame."

The men around her came to their feet. With flinty eyes they sidled toward her. Youko grasped the hilt of the sword inside the overcoat.

"What you come here asking questions for?"

"I needed directions."

"You take me for a fool?"

They had her on all sides. Six burly men. Youko took a firmer hold on the sword when an unexpected voice called out.

"Hold your horses!"

Youko stole a glance in the direction of the cry. The men as well turned toward the back of the tavern. A gap opened up in the wall. She saw a boy, maybe fourteen or fifteen. He appeared awfully small amidst those big men.

He walked up to them, grabbed the big man by the arm. "Let her go." He said to Youko. "You may leave now."

"Hey." The big man tried to free himself. The kid wrapped his arm around his in an imploring manner. He also wore a ring on his finger. Youko committed it to memory.

"Sorry if they seem a little intimidating. They don't have much experience being around girls."

"Oh."

Continuing to tug on the big man's arm, he pressed his cheek against the man's upper arm and smiled. "Please don't take any offense."

Youko nodded. She turned on her heels. The cordon of men reluctantly broke apart. She pushed through them to the door, briefly glancing back over her shoulder at the young man. Then she straightened her head and marched out of the tavern.

"What you let her go for, Sekki?"

The big man watched the girl leave and then turned his attention to the boy hanging off his arm. The boy took a breath and let it out. He disentangled his arm and laughed. "I didn't do it for her sake. I did it for yours, big brother."

"You saying a little thing like her could have taken us?"

"That was no ordinary courage." Sekki glanced at the door the girl had just left through. "That was a very dangerous girl."

"What?"

"When she put her overcoat down on the chair, it made far too heavy a sound." Sekki narrowed his eyes. "Considering the length, I'd say it was a sword. A long sword."

Every eye in the place turned toward the door.

Youko walked down the forlorn streets feeling distinctly dissatisfied.

Something is going on.

That big guy was definitely the man she had seen in Hokui. Furthermore, the men hanging around inside that tavern were a hard bunch, and they gave off a mean vibe. Hardly the typical clientele. And then that kid. Youko drew her brows together.

She drew close to the main thoroughfare. She raised her head. From the intersection ahead of her came a scream. Not of one or two people. The cries of many. And the sound of wheels racing along the ground, the pounding of horses' hooves.

Youko ran down the alleyway and sprinted into the main thoroughfare. She saw a carriage fleeing down the street. People standing around in shock. The body of a child crumpled on the ground.

The slanting rays of sunlight bathed the avenue in a whiter shade of pale.

Chapter 37

[9-4] At last, Suzu could get down from the wagon and stretch her aching back. They'd arrived at Takuhou, the westernmost city in Wa Province. Ei Province was not far past this city. And after that, it was a journey of no more than five days.

Helping Seishuu down from the wagon, Suzu had to smile. "Tomorrow we'll be in Ei Province."

"Yeah," Seishuu smiled in turn and then slumped to the ground. This happened a lot more, lately. Just as he was getting up, his knees would give out.

"You okay?"

"You carry me, and I'll be okay."

"When you're better, I'm going to work you like a horse."

Seishuu laughed. Of course, she couldn't carry him around while she searched for an inn, so she went to ask the driver if he'd look after him for a while. "Only until I find a room, if you don't mind"

"Okay. But be back before the gates close."

The gates of the city closed at sunset. After that, there was no coming or going. Suzu searched the sky. The sun was still not so low in the sky.

"I'll be back as soon as possible."

Seishuu sat beside the gate and watched the people walking to and fro. A few yards off, the driver twiddled his thumbs.

"Hey, Mister, you can go if you want."

When the man turned to him, Seishuu smiled and pointed beyond the gates. For some reason or another, the words rarely came out of his mouth right. People frequently misunderstood him. But he wasn't self-conscious. Suzu could understand him, but other people couldn't, no matter how often he repeated himself.

"You go. Okay." Seishuu again got to his feet. He tottered a bit but could stand.

When the man saw this, he smiled in turn. "Thanks!" he called out, and jogged back to his wagon. He had people waiting at home for him. He waved as he drove through the gate.

Seishuu waved after him. He looked around. He didn't see Suzu. It was boring. But if he didn't stay here they'd end up missing each other. In the meantime, he wandered around the gate. The outer loop road ran around the city just inside the walls. Stalls lined the avenue on both sides, narrowing the road somewhat, but it was still plenty wide.

Seishuu tottered along, apologizing to the people he bumped into. He went over to look at the gate. Peddlers' voices sang out over the crowds. From somewhere close came the sound of buskers. The spirited music flowing around him. Trying to see where it was coming from, he stepped into the street.

He didn't hear the sound of the horse-drawn carriage, drowned out by the music. It came rushing at him from the right. He didn't see it. He was blind on that side.

The look on a man's face directly across the way at last told him of the two teams of horses bearing down on him. He hurriedly tried to jump out of the way, but for Seishuu, who lately couldn't walk a straight line without calmly putting one foot carefully in front of the other, this was a near impossibility. He staggered, and far from getting out of the way, tumbled to the ground in front of the carriage.

The carriage came to a hasty halt. The horses reared and neighed. *This is awkward*, Seishuu thought. The carriage was opulently detailed, the property of an aristocrat. He'd catch a thrashing for blocking the road.

"What are you doing? Get out of the way!" The censorious voice rang out from inside the carriage.

"Sorry," Seishuu muttered. He hastened to stand but tripped over his own feet.

"What is this brat blocking my way for?"

"I'm sorry, sir. You see, I'm not doing too well."

A man dressed in ministerial robes glared at him. He couldn't understand Seishuu. Seishuu knelt and bowed his head.

"Couldn't care less. Go." The voice of the man inside the carriage was laced with laughter.

Seishuu frantically tried to get up and flopped back down again. His limbs had to fail him now. Like a bad joke happening to somebody else. He again tried to rise, heard the sound of carriage begin to roll, the shrill snap of the whip. The horses neighed and galloped straight toward him.

He attempted to back out of the way but his legs wouldn't cooperate. He had to try and crawl. All of a sudden the energy had gone out of his body. He futilely clawed at the earth and collapsed there on the ground. The horses' hooves raised a cloud of dust about his head.

His thoughts stopped. There was nothing that he could think to think about.

Screams echoed down the boulevard.

The carriage rushed on without a pause. Then it slowed and resumed its leisurely pace. His retinue followed after, passing down the street as if nothing had happened. Everyone else who had watched the tragedy unfold before their eyes froze in horror. Within an empty space inside the crowd lay the trampled child.

Many there thought to rouse themselves to help him, but were equally cowed at the thought of the retinue turning back. The banner that they carried was the banner of prefectural governor. It was his carriage. His name was Shoukou. Making a scene in his presence was a very risky thing to do. Everybody who lived along the street had learned that lesson well.

The child moaned. *Yes, he might still be saved. But wait at least until Shoukou's carriage has turned the corner.*

The child lifted his head slightly and then let fall. He heard the sound of his own skull splashing into the mire of his own blood. Again he tried to raise his head and look for help, but could not.

The people stopped on the street and looked at him with vacant eyes. No one was coming to his rescue. He wanted to get up but could not.

It hurts, Suzu.

Someone ran out of the nearby alleyway. She stopped, spun around with an extraordinary grace and rushed over to him.

“Are you okay?”

She knelt down next to him. He had no idea who she was. His eyes were already growing so dim that all he could see was that her leggings were soaked with red.

She called out, “Somebody bring a wagon!” Seishuu felt her warm hand on his shoulder. “Hold on.”

“Oh damn, I’m dying.”

“You’ll be okay.”

“Suzu will get all weepy on me.” Once you got her started, the tears just kept coming. It was such a downer.

He thought nothing else after that.

Suzu ran over from the hitching post next to the gate. Seishuu was suspiciously nowhere to be found. *Where did he go?* she asked herself, looking around. Not far off, a crowd of people was gathering. Something was going on. A strange wind blew down the avenue.

She finally approached the bystanders, asking, “Have you seen a kid about this tall?” She strayed closer to the crowd. Though there were quite a number gathered there, they were shrouded in silence. “Um, have you seen a kid with orange hair?”

A voice called out from the other side of the crowd. “Do you mean this child?”

Suzu clawed her way through the throng and froze on the spot. A person was kneeling there on the ground and next to her the crumpled form of a child.

“Seishuu!”

He must have collapsed. His condition had been getting worse lately. She

rushed up to him and stopped in shock. Where did all this blood come from?

“Seishuu!” Suzu knelt, scanned the faces around them. “What happened? Somebody call a doctor!”

“It’s too late.”

Suzu turned abruptly to the source of that calm voice. “If we don’t get a doctor . . .”

“He’s dead.”

Suzu stared at the girl with wide eyes. She was the same age as her, perhaps a tad younger. Her crimson hair was so red it almost looked dyed.

“No . . .”

“Your name?”

Suzu shook her head. This was no time for pleasantries. They had to get help immediately.

“If you are Suzu, then he asked that you not cry for him.” The girl lowered her eyes. “I’m pretty sure that’s what he wished me to tell you.”

“This can’t be!” Suzu touched his body. It was still warm to the touch. “Seishuu!”

How did he get this awful wound? His particular orange hair, that so agreed with everything about him, was splattered with blood. Why were his arms and legs all bent up like this? Why was his chest caved in like this?

“No, it’s not true . . . is it?”

But they were going to Gyouten. They were going to meet the Imperial Kei and she was going to cure him. Suzu took the boy’s body in her arms, embracing him like the hostage rescued from the enemy.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. When I found him, he was already like this on the ground. I suspect he was trampled by a horse.”

“Whose?” Suzu surveyed the people around her, seeking out the villain. They shook their heads. “Bastards!” *Who could do such a thing?* She balled her hands

into fists, the question echoing over and over in her mind. "Seishuu . . . the bastards who did this . . . !"

The drum sounded, announcing the closing of the gate. The crowd melted away in ones and twos. Before long, no one was left in the thoroughfare but the weeping Suzu and the body of the boy.

"Seishuu. Gyouten is right there in front of us."

Part X

Chapter 38

[10-1] “Youshi, what’s all that blood!”

Rangyoku cried out as soon as Youko took off her overcoat. Youko shook her head. “It’s not mine. I came across an injured boy in Takuhou.”

“Goodness gracious!”

“The boy was run over by a carriage. The whole thing gave me a bad feeling.”

With the closing of the gates fast approaching, she had left Takuhou in a hurry, rode Hankyo till they were near Hokui and made it by the skin of her teeth.

“The carriage was already some ways off when I got there. But the only conclusion I can come to is that it was responsible. Yet it didn’t stop and nobody chased after it.”

“Well, that’s Shoukou for you.”

“Who?” said Youko, leaning toward her.

Rangyoku returned to her chair in the main room and continued the sewing that she had interrupted. “The governor of Shisui Prefecture. If it was a real luxurious carriage, then it was probably him. Nobody but the governor ever rides in a carriage like that.”

“He is that well known?”

“Very much so. A beast like him doesn’t associate with little people like us.” Rangyoku frowned. “There are people in Hokui who ran away from Shisui. You don’t hear so much about it recently. They say that prefectoral guards at the border inspect everybody who tries to leave. Lots of bad rumors come out of that place.”

“Really?”

“We’re really lucky, this being the Taiho’s domain. I’ve heard the province lord

of Wa is a really dreadful person. A long time ago, he used to be the duke here.”

“That’s what Enho says too.”

Rangyoku nodded. “It was really awful back then. Thankfully, he got sent to Wa Province. It must be tough on the people of Wa. There’s no guarantee that our peaceful lifestyle will go on forever. We live now in the Duchy of Yellow, but I don’t know if that’s going to last either. Even if we stay in the Duchy of Yellow, when I turn twenty I’ll move to a homestead. It could be in Wa.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“It’d be better if I could find a good person in the next two years.” Rangyoku laughed. Youko tilted her head quizzically. “Find a nice guy in Hokui and get married at the same time I get my partition. If I’m registered under his name, I could transfer my partition to his village. If there’s available land, that is.”

Youko blinked several times. “That’s your reason for getting married?”

“Where you get your partition is really important. Do you know what an intercessor is?”

Youko shook her head. “No.”

“They introduce you to a marriage partner, set the conditions and arrange for the meeting. For a fee, they register you on the census and transfer the land. And after that, you split up. That’s what an intercessor does.”

“That’s incredible.”

“You think so?”

“In Yamato, marriage is not so simple. Well, recently, people have become adept at getting divorces but it’s not exactly an admirable thing to do. Splitting up so simply is pretty surprising.”

Rangyoku giggled. “Yamato must really be a great place. In my case, when I find the right person, we’re going to stay together and have children and raise a family. But if my partition ends up in Wa, that’s what I’ll do. Did you know that the tax rate in Shisui Prefecture is seventy percent?”

“You’re kidding!”

Taxes typically came to ten percent of the harvest. Adding in special levies to support the military and the civil service, it shouldn't exceed twenty percent. That was established policy.

"Levies amount to twenty percent, and there's a ten percent poll tax. A twenty percent excise tax for building bridges and dikes. A contingency tax for defending against youma and funding the orphanages. It all adds up to seventy percent."

"That's crazy."

The law consisted of the Law of the Land and the Divine Decrees, also known as the Great Colonnade. The Divine Decrees were the provisions handed down by Heaven. Not even an emperor could violate them. Laws promulgated by the emperor were known as the Law of the Land. It was equally forbidden for province lords and governors to abrogate the Law of the Land. The tax rate was established according to the Law of the Land. It was ten percent. Province lords and governors were allowed to impose another five percent on top of that. The current imperial tax rate had been reduced to eight percent and no additional levies were allowed.

That's what Youko said. "Levies are not now allowed. Furthermore, I haven't heard of any additional taxes being imposed. To start with, what in the world are these contingency and excise taxes? Those services should be provided by the Imperial Army."

Rangyoku said with a nervous laugh, "That's why they say Shoukou is a tyrant. Really, I can't understand why the empress looks the other way when there are people like him around." She cut the thread she was sewing with and stuck the needle in the pincushion. "Better get dinner ready. You need to change. If Keikei sees all that blood, it'll throw him for a loop."

Youko left the main hall and went straight to the study. She called out to Enho and entered the room. He was replacing a book on the bookshelf. When he saw her the alarm shown on his face.

"Youko, where did that blood come from?"

"I helped somebody in an accident. That's not why I'm here. Did you know that the tax rate in Shisui Prefecture is seventy percent?"

Enho sighed softly. “I see. You heard about that. That’s why you went to Shisui.”

“That’s actually not why I went to Shisui, but is it true?”

“It’s true. Settle down.”

“I don’t recall ever authorizing that!”

In response to this outburst, Enho took another breath and showed her to a chair. “Losing your temper won’t help anybody. Look, Youko, the tax rate in Hokui is thirty percent.”

Youko gaped at him. “But Hokui is in the Duchy of Yellow!”

“No matter how compassionate a duke we may have, it won’t do much good if he can’t keep an eye on things every minute of day.”

Youko took a deep breath and dejectedly sat down in front of Enho.

“Don’t let it get you down. No enlightened monarch can take over the reins of government all by herself. Without capable ministers to back her up, the rule of law will never take hold in the kingdom.”

“But—”

“Kei of late has *not* been blessed with enlightened monarchs. Have you heard the people of Hokui complaining? You haven’t. Back when Gahou was in charge, the tax rate was fifty percent. Under the Duchy of Yellow, it’s thirty percent. Everybody is very grateful for that.”

Youko had nothing to say in reply.

“Of the seventy percent tax that Shoukou levies, the imperial tax comes to ten percent. Gahou skims off forty percent. The remaining twenty percent is left to Shoukou. Shoukou is a skilled bureaucrat with a knack for tax collection so Gahou takes a special interest in him. At any rate, Shoukou seems to be just the kind of person capable of raising that forty percent for Gahou.”

“But why?” *Why were such things allowed to go on?* Youko found herself on the verge of tears at her helpless and worthless state.

“In fact, in Wa Province reclamation projects are thriving. Building dikes here

and there, bridges here and there. Gahou insists that he is not collecting taxes but spending money already set aside. And if he is building dikes and bridges with that money, it's difficult for the kingdom to criticize him. Nevertheless, the bridges in Wa tend to come falling down. Even when the rain doesn't fall. It's something of a joke. But if everybody says that's because the engineers are cutting corners, it's hard to directly criticize Gahou."

"So that's what it comes down to."

Chousai had the Privy Council under his thumb—well, having demoted him, she ought to refer to him as Taisai—but Seikyou and his ilk hated Gahou like snakes hate scorpions. All this venom notwithstanding, it had to be said that Gahou never left a flank open to attack. If Seikyou could do nothing, then short of an Imperial Rescript delivered by Youko herself, Gahou would stay one step ahead of the law. Many voices within the ministries clamored for such a Rescript, but many objected just as vehemently, saying that enacting Rescripts not founded on hard evidence could plunge the kingdom into chaos. Even those opposed were distressed by Gahou's actions, making clear how unsympathetic a character he was.

"But Gahou and Shoukou aren't the only public servants lining their own pockets. The kingdom is replete with them. Arresting only Gahou and Shoukou will accomplish nothing. Another Gahou would soon appear."

Youko lifted her head. "But better than doing nothing."

"And on what basis?"

"That is—"

"Shoukou is a beast. But with Gahou giving him cover, getting a warrant would be difficult. If it were that simple, somebody would have already taken care of it."

"Today I saw Shoukou kill a child."

Enho looked at her in surprise. "Really? This was something Shoukou actually did?"

"Probably."

Youko explained the situation. Enho sighed. "I see, and that person was the one responsible. Do you think that it would be enough to arrest him on?"

"But—"

"He'll claim that he wasn't the one in the carriage. Or you'll see a mountain of testimonials that it wasn't the carriage itself that killed the boy. Don't forget that Shoukou is a governor because he can wield that kind of power."

Youko bit her lip.

"It is not good to leave such a public servant to his own devices, but bend the law in order to exact retribution and the law loses its meaning. That is a far worse sin. Let's not get impatient."

Youko bowed and left the study. She tightly shut the door to her own room.

"Hankyo, I hate to impose but I'd like you to go to Kinpa Palace."

"About Shoukou?"

"Yes. We've got to do something. Tell Keiki that I'd like him to investigate."

"By your command."

With that, the room fell silent. Youko furrowed her brow. The image of the boy rose up in her mind. He'd been so emaciated. Whether or not Shoukou had deliberately killed him, she couldn't say.

"It is all so sad."

And such a small child. If Shoukou had killed him, then it was her fault for keeping such a monster in office.

The boy's dying words echoed in her ears. He didn't want to die because Suzu would weep for him. His older sister? Or . . . Youko suddenly looked up. "Suzu?"

What a strange name. Hardly a common name around here. Perhaps . . .

Because Youko was listed upon the Registry of Wizards and everything was automatically translated for her, her language skills were truly lame. Thinking back about it now, she couldn't recall what language the girl was speaking. She couldn't even remember what she looked like. Only the pain and grief in her eyes. Why hadn't she noticed, why hadn't she taken the time to ask?

Where were you born?

Youko glanced down at her bloodstained clothing. *I need to go back there, to Shisui.* She shook her head. What would she say to her? Shoukou stayed in office because of her. In Kei, there were still laws that discriminated against kaikyaku. She hadn't repealed them. If she met a kaikyaku, she would have nothing to say worth listening to.

"I really am worthless as a monarch."

Chapter 39

[10-2] *The way I see it, there's two kinds of crying.*

It's true, Suzu thought, gazing at the casket being lowered into the grave. She'd never wept such heartbreaking tears. The lamentations tore at her chest until she was out of breath, until there was nothing left inside her but emptiness.

The sad little shrine stood alone in the cemetery outside the city of Takuhou. The barrel-like casket sat there throughout the night and now disappeared into the hole.

"Stop," Suzu had begged the grave keeper. "Don't bury him. It's too sad." She knew it was a meaningless request.

He reassured her with a pat on the back and all but tore the casket from her grasp and hauled it away. Again, she repeated the same vain request as a stone struck the top of the casket and the grave was filled in.

The round shape of the casket symbolized the egg from which people were born in this world. *From the husk you were born, to the husk you shall return.* The ranka containing the child was plucked from the riboku. The parents would tap on the ranka with a stone to create a crack, a good luck charm to ensure a quick birth. Following that custom, they used a round, egg-like casket made from fired-clay, and then, presaging the reincarnation of the dead, opened a fissure in its surface with a stone.

The hole was filled in, leaving behind a small mound of earth. Even after the grave keepers left, Suzu stood there dumbly.

I knew it all along.

She knew Seishuu was going to die. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she'd always known it was going to happen. The symptoms were too severe. He couldn't eat. He was wasting away. He was getting worse all over.

Could the Imperial Kei have saved him? The empress surely should have been able to. On the other hand, far from everything turning out okay, it was equally likely that neither the empress nor the imperial surgeons could have done

anything for him.

"But he didn't deserve to die like that."

Why'd he have to get killed in a hit and run? Even if he hadn't, he wouldn't have lived that much longer.

"I am an idiot." Suzu clutched at the earth. "I put all my faith in the Imperial Kei. Why didn't I take him to a doctor in Goto!"

Taking him to a doctor might have proved pointless as well. That fear, coupled with the conviction that the Imperial Kei would save him, created these foolish expectations. Better to have taken him to a doctor in Goto, right after they got off the boat. If they only hadn't come here.

"Seishuu . . . I'm sorry." The sobs still filled the throat. Her tears had not dried.
"I'm sorry."

A cloud passed across the sun. Suzu stared at her own shadow.

"Miss, the gates are closing."

She turned blankly toward the sound of the voice. She saw a figure of a smallish person. For a moment, she grasped at false hopes.

"You going to be here long? Your teeth are chattering."

"Leave me alone."

He looked three or four years older than Seishuu. About fourteen. A small-framed boy with black hair. The boy said, "In Kei, it's still not safe to be caught outside a city at night."

Suzu glared at him. "Leave me alone. Don't worry about me."

"You want to get eaten by a youma? You got some sort of death wish?"

"You wouldn't understand. Go on ahead."

The boy didn't answer. For a little while, standing behind her, she felt his eyes on her back. "Nobody understands how I feel at all!" she cried.

The boy answered quietly, "Crying out of self-pity does no respect to the dead."

Suzu's eyes felt a small shock of déjà vu. *People who cry because they feel so sorry for themselves.* "Who are you?"

"I'm from Takuhou. Shall we return together?"

Suzu got to her feet. Once again she looked down at the small mound of earth. "Do you know who he was?"

"Everybody knows about it. You came from Sou?"

The boy held out his hand. Suzu took it. He had a warm, delicate palm. She said, "This child is a child of Kei. He fled the kingdom and went to Kou. Then he fled Kou and went to Sou. And now he was returning to Kei."

"I see," the boy said to himself. He looked back at the mound of earth. "That is sad."

"Yes," Suzu nodded. The tears spilled down her cheeks. Still weeping, the boy's hand in hers, they returned to the city.

"Are you from Takuhou?"

They arrived back at the city just as the gates closed. Inside the gates, Suzu averted her eyes from the right-hand side of the road and more tightly gripped the hand in hers. She didn't let go until they had crossed the main boulevard.

"Are you from Kei, then?"

"No. From Sai."

"That's a long voyage. Do you have a place to stay?"

Suzu nodded her head. "Thank you for talking to me."

"Sure," said the boy. He looked at her. "Cheer up. If you don't walk facing forward, you'll end up falling into a hole."

"Into a hole?"

"The hole of your own self-pity."

"Yeah," Suzu muttered to herself. That would be disrespectful to Seishuu. She could hear Seishuu still scolding her. "You're right about that. Thanks."

"No problem."

"What's your name?"

"Sekki."

"Hey," said Suzu, looking into his face. "Do you know if that guy who ran over Seishuu has been arrested?"

Shh, Sekki said, quieting her with his eyes. "Best you don't talk about such things so people can hear." He led her into a nearby alleyway. "That guy won't be arrested."

"You mean you know who it is?"

"Not an acquaintance, if that's what you mean. I wouldn't want to be known as an friend of that beast."

The vehemence with which he spoke surprised her. "Who is it?"

"Everybody in the city knows. *The governor killed the boy traveler.*"

"The governor?"

The governor, Shoukou. Remember that name. The most dangerous man in Shisui Prefecture."

"He killed Seishuu?"

"The boy fell down in front of Shoukou carriage. The carriage stopped. And then . . ."

"And then . . . he would do something like that?"

"Shoukou is completely capable of it."

"That's awful." Suzu slumped against the wall and slid to the ground. "Seishuu couldn't even walk straight." She hugged her knees. "I should have carried him on my back." Why had she been so unwilling to? He hardly weighed anything at all. She could have done it.

"You shouldn't blame yourself, Suzu."

Suzu shook her head. There was no way she could blame anybody but herself.

"And it does no good to blame Shoukou."

"Why not!" A fierce expression rose to Suzu's face.

"Begrudging Shoukou is as good as getting murdered by him all over again." He turned and added almost as an aside, "I guess no one taught you that until now."

Chapter 40

[10-3] From the eastern quarter of Ryuu, Shoukei and Rakushun crossed Mt. Koushoo and entered En. As soon as they crossed the border, Shoukei gaped at the splendidly maintained roads.

They'd traveled parallel to the ridgeline of the Koushoo mountains, making their way along the valleys, then climbed the switchbacks up the face of the mountains, stayed a night there, and climbed further to the summit of a small peak. At the summit, a city hugged the slopes. A high barrier wall divided the very center of the long, narrow city. In the wall was a huge gate. This side of the gate was Ryuu. On the other was En.

The differences in the appearance of the streets and the cities themselves facing the barrier wall were highly curious. Upon reaching the gates, the potholed roads turned into trim stone-paved avenues. The typical panorama of small shops lining the rutted streets along the main boulevard, people, carriages and carts all tangled up together. Crossing into En on the other side of the gate, the shops stood smartly in tiers and waves of people flowed down the sidewalks between the shops and the right-of-way alongside the road.

"Amazing."

The building lining the streets were tall. Many were built from stone, four or five stories high, windows glazed with glass. Ryuu also had tall building with glass windows. But those buildings struck her as gloomy and decrepit. Perhaps because the buildings in Ryuu were so much older. Perhaps because of the frozen water puddling on the worn stone roadways. Perhaps because the glass windows were clouded and cracked. In any case, it looked like Ryuu had tried hard to mimic En but had tired of the effort and quit halfway through.

I had heard En was wealthy, but . . .

The wealthiest of the northern kingdoms. Yet the sight of this city, more than anything she had imagined, left her speechless.

"En is a cold country. How can it be so different?"

When it came to the seasons, Hou and En had much in common. En was situated further south than Hou. But it was located in the northeast corner of the continent and during the winter was swept by freezing seasonal winds. In fact, the sense she gotten as they walked along was that it grew no warmer as they came closer to En.

“Are there large mines here?”

Rakushun glanced over his shoulder and smiled. “No. Unlike Hou or Ryuu, En isn’t rich in natural resources. Growing wheat and raising cattle, that’s about it.”

The cities were big and business flourished, explained Rakushun, but the larger portion of the kingdom’s wealth came from the annual harvest.

“But a difference this big!”

“That has to do with the qualities of the emperors.”

“The emperors? That accounts for all this?”

“En hasn’t faltered in five hundred years. That’s the biggest difference.”

“But—”

“When the throne is occupied, natural disasters occur less frequently. With fewer wars and natural disasters, the population grows. The people work hard and cultivate land and agricultural stocks grow as well. By maintaining the fields well, harvests flourish. The kingdom carefully controls surpluses of grain to ensure against overproduction and price deflation. The kingdom manages the land and stockpiles against a rainy day, and thus keeps everything in good condition.”

“For example,” Rakushun continued, “dig drainage canals to prepare for the rainy season. Build bridges over the canals and secure them with stone foundation so they don’t collapse. Cover the canals where they cut through roads. By preparing and following a well thought-out plan, the cities can be protected. Over ten or twenty years, carry these programs throughout the kingdom. With a kingdom being guided over a long period of time by a single policy, it will come to be adopted in the kingdom’s furthest precincts.”

Shoukei’s father had sat on the throne for thirty years. The previous emperor

had ruled for not half a century. In contrast to them, this was the result of a single emperor governing for half a millennium.

"The kingdoms of short-lived kings are quite unfortunate. You finally create a business and build it into something big, and then it's swept away by a flood and you have to start all over again."

"True."

"The Imperial Hou was infamous for his cruelty. Maybe not to you, but such an emperor was not a blessing to his subjects."

Shoukei glanced briefly at Rakushun's profile. "Probably not."

"The emperor is there to help the people. Oppressive emperors do not stay in their positions for long. What is difficult going now will grow all the worse when an emperor falls. And when the Saiho dies as well, it will take five to ten years for a new emperor to be chosen. Twenty years might not be unusual. When natural disasters have gone on for two decades, the land is devastated. Even finding enough food to eat becomes problematic."

Shoukei said, "No matter the emperor, he gives his all for the people. But it's not necessarily true that these efforts will quickly come to fruition and yield results. When a kingdom is in chaos, so are men's hearts. For the time being, judgments must be severe and the people brought back to the straight and narrow. Don't you think that is necessary?"

Her father had said so often. Whenever he promulgated a new law, there were ministers who complained it was too strict. He repeatedly insisted that in order to reorganize a kingdom, such steps were required.

"But to such an extent? There are limits to everything. True, overthrowing an emperor is perhaps going too far."

"The Imperial Hou did not fall because he lost the Divine Mandate but because traitors assassinated him."

Rakushun nodded. "The province lord of Kei rose up and struck down the king. Though regicide is a grave crime, it is not always proscribed. In some cases, it might be preferable."

Shoukei bowed her head. It was beginning to dawn on her why her father had been so hated, why a traitor like Gekkei remained so popular. The people believed that Chuutatsu was only making things worse. Gekkei acted before ruin was visited upon them, and so they revered him. The people made their choices clear. And thus their reproach had turned on Shoukei as well, who'd never once remonstrated with the emperor.

"Let's go," Rakushun said.

Shoukei strode from the rather sad Ryuu side of the city to the bright and thriving En side of the city. The name of both cities was Hokuro.

As expected, when entering En, passports were expected. According to custom, passports were always inspected when crossing an international border in order to check the movement of criminals and inspect any luggage. A traveler wasn't necessarily turned away for lack of a passport but did have to be questioned by an immigration official.

Having been told about this beforehand, Shoukei nervously told the border guard that she did not have a passport. She was shown to a building next to the gate but another guard stopped then. "No need to bother," he said. "As long as you're with him, you can be on your way."

The guard politely handed Rakushun's passport back to him. Rakushun bowed and passed through the gate. Shoukei asked him again, "So exactly who are you?"

"Like I said, a student."

"Whenever I think about it, you're an awfully suspicious guy."

"I've got my reasons. Just as you have yours."

"It's almost as if your plan all along was to investigate Ryuu."

"That was part of it. I wanted to see what other kingdoms were like. When I was living in Kou I heard a lot about En. Actually going there was a whole lot different. School is in recess from the New Year till spring. So I wanted to spend the time taking a look at the other kingdoms. As it turned out, there were some people happy to make the necessary arrangements if I went to Ryuu. In exchange, I was to fill them in on the state of affairs in Ryuu."

Shoukei gave Rakushun a sideways glance. “You mean, like whether Ryuu was in decline.”

“Yeah,” Rakushun nodded. “This is a matter of no small import. If Ryuu is failing, then its borders will become more and more dangerous. Refugees will start flooding out of Ryuu. A kingdom has got to prepare for that kind of eventuality. A heads-up beforehand can make a big difference.”

“So you were sent to investigate.”

“That’s pretty much it. En is a wealthy kingdom, truly blessed. The land and the people are at peace. That doesn’t mean it’s free from problems.” Rakushun looked over his shoulder and pointed back at the gate. “The Ryuu side of the city is rather forlorn. No two ways about it, it’s better to stay at an inn in En. Despite this, come nightfall and you have many people entering Ryuu. Why would that be?”

Shoukei craned her neck, looking backwards. “It is strange, now that you mention it. So many people leaving like that. There’s no way they could make it to the next city now.”

“It’s because there’s no low-rent district in En.”

“Eh?”

“The people of En are well off. When they stay in an inn, they don’t have to share lodgings with people they don’t know. In the first place, such establishments aren’t that common. And the clientele tend to be the kind who skip out on the rent so innkeepers have no fondness for them. However, not all the citizens of En are rich. There are itinerants, refugees, people just scraping by. Lodgings for these people are hard to come by in En. True of traveling. In En, it’s pretty much by carriage or nothing.”

Carriages pulled by one or more teams of horses frequented the highways, speeding travelers from one city to the next. In the countryside, farmers with time on their hands would make their horse carts and wagons available for transportation. Otherwise, driving a carriage or stagecoach was an occupational specialty.

“Because En is a wealthy kingdom, there is no need for farmers to hire

themselves out during the off-season. Usually, only the rich ride in carriages, but in En, anybody can. Moreover, the rates are reasonable, though not as cheap as a horse cart. People have enough in their pockets that they tend not to quibble. Still, lacking the horse carts that poor people can afford, if the poor have got to travel during the winter, it's on foot."

Shouko again glanced back at the gate. The travelers heading in the Ryuu were indeed a worn-out, unpretentious, motley-looking bunch. At a glance, it was obvious from the tide of people flowing through the customs houses on either side of the gate that they were mostly refugees and itinerants without passports.

"People flock to En because it is wealthy. But the distinctions between the citizens of En and the people flooding in, between rich and poor, can't be erased. Those who can't find lodging often camp out in the streets and freeze to death. Then you've got desperate men who, fearing that fate, become thieves and robbers. Refugees are En's biggest problem. In some of En's larger cities, the number of refugees and itinerants are becoming significant. In these past ten years, dealing with them has turned into a real headache."

"That's why you're concerned about the state of things in Ryuu."

"That would be it."

"So, tell me, who did endorse your passport?"

Rakushun only waved his tail in response.

"What, you can't show me?"

Without answering, Rakushun took the passport from his pocket and held it out to her. On the back was the fresh seal of the Chousai of En, an In Hakutaku.

"The Chousai . . . "

Rakushun fluttered his whiskers. "Don't take that to mean I've ever talked to the man. The person who let me borrow the suugu got the endorsement from the Chousai for me."

The Chousai was the head of the Rikkan, the chief minister. Anybody who could make such a request from the Chousai would have to be close to the center of power.

"That's impressive."

Rakushun scratched at the bottom of his ear. "It's not that I'm an important person. But I do happen to know the Imperial Kei."

"The Imperial Kei?"

As soon as the words came out of her mouth, Shoukei felt a pain in her chest. "How could someone like you . . . ?"

Rakushun said, answering the rest of the question. "How could a hanjuu like me know her?"

Shoukei hurriedly apologized, "No, I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. I am nothing more than the hanjuu you see. But I don't see anything wrong with that. Though you do make it sound as if there is."

"I didn't mean that."

"The Imperial Kei is an acquaintance of mine. A friend. I like to think that she counts me as a friend as well. That might strike some as very strange. I resisted it at first too. I mean, she being an empress and all. I told her once that I couldn't very well go around calling her my friend and she practically chewed my head off."

"The Imperial Kei did?"

"Yeah. She said that there was no more distance between us than that of two people standing next to each other." Rakushun smiled. "I found her dying at the side of the road. So I picked her up and took her to En."

Shoukei's mouth dropped open. "Dying at the side of the road? The Imperial Kei?"

"She's a kaikyaku. A taika. She was swept onto the shores of Kou. At the time, the standing edict in Kou was to execute all kaikyaku. They pursued her until she collapsed from exhaustion."

Shoukei pressed her hand to her chest. She'd believed that this girl had become empress and been blessed with that great fortune without so much as lifting a finger.

"When I first took the Imperial Kei to Kankuu, I thought I'd get myself a nice little job as a reward. The longer I was with her, the pettier such goals became. When asked what I wished as a reward, I planned to say: admission to secondary school. But when the moment actually came, I blurted out: *university*. I'd mostly studied at home so I was really bluffing when I said I wanted to go to college."

Shoukei looked at Rakushun, a jumble of feelings going through her. "I don't think anybody's going to give you a reward for taking me to En."

"That had nothing to do with it. You looked pretty miserable sitting there in that jail cell."

"Me?"

"Yours was the face of somebody who had taken about all she could take." He narrowed his eyes. "It reminded me of the Imperial Kei when I first met her."

"So you picked me up and took me to En."

Rakushun laughed. "Like I told you, these chance encounters seem to be my destiny."

Part XI

Chapter 41

[11-1] En was situated to the southeast of Ryuu but the winters weren't that different. Just as in Ryuu, traveling except by horse-drawn wagon was tough. Though in En, people used carriages. The team of horses pulled a solidly-built coach and took them south on well-groomed roads.

Poorer travelers walked along the shoulders of the road. The wind was cold. The only way to keep from freezing was to keep moving. They clutched *onjaku* to their chests, heads ducked into the wind, and carried sacks filled with a little charcoal and firewood over their shoulders. Here and there along the highway, the firewood would feed bonfires where they could warm themselves. They cast sideways glances at the stagecoach as it rushed past.

"It must be rough to have to travel on foot," Shoukei said to Rakushun, sitting across from her.

The coach seated two facing bench seats that each could sit three people. Shoukei and Rakushun were the only passengers.

"Shoukei, do you still want to go to Tai?"

Shoukei let out a breath. "I really wanted to go to Kei."

"Eh?"

"I wanted to go to Kei and work for a minister, get close to the Imperial Kei. I'd ingratiate myself with her. And when the opening presented itself, usurp the throne. Something like that. I'm pretty sure half of it was in my imagination. But half of it was serious. Are you mad at me?"

"No. But if you really were serious, there's no way I could look at you again."

"You're right." Shoukei laughed. "I needed to get registered on the census. I heard that if you went to Tai and caught a boat to Kei, you could get land and get registered in Kei."

Rakushun gave her a surprised look. “That’s news to me.”

“The original goal was to go to Tai with the kitsuryou. But for the time being, it’s just as well going to Kei and looking for some land there.”

Shoukei looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. “In fact, being the princess royal was a big deal to me. I didn’t want to give up living in the palace and my luxurious lifestyle. It was really embarrassing working in the fields and wearing commonplace clothes. When I heard that the Imperial Kei was the same age as me, I envied her so much. I couldn’t forgive her for having all that I had lost.”

“I see.”

“To tell the truth, it’s still hard for me to stay in cheap hotels. It’s mortifying to have to wear wool. But that’s the penance I’ve got to pay.” She clenched her hands, turning the tips of her entwined fingers white. “All I did was play around at the palace. I didn’t do anything else. I didn’t know people hated my father so much that they wanted to murder him. I didn’t want to know. And now I’m paying for it. That’s why Gekkei—he’s the marquis of Kei Province—erased me from the Registry of Wizards. I get it now.”

“Yeah.”

“If I hadn’t been the princess royal, I’d just be another child at the orphanage. I’d still be in my minority, without the wits to become a government official. That’s why I got sent to the orphanage. I didn’t have a clue. I just didn’t get it.”

“Better you get it now than never.”

“Yeah,” Shoukei laughed. “The Imperial Kei, what kind of person is she?”

“She’s about the same age as you.”

“But not an idiot like me.”

“Oh, she would call herself an idiot. And then she would say: *But they made me empress anyway!*”

Shoukei laughed again. “She sounds like me.”

“Perhaps. You are more, well, feminine. The empress is kind of rough about the edges.”

Shoukei giggled and looked out the window at the passing scenery. "I'd like to go to Kei." She wanted to meet this empress. And if not meet her, she wanted to see what kind of kingdom she was going to create.

"Returnee groups are forming all over En and heading to Kei."

"You mean, since the Imperial Kei was enthroned people have been going back."

"Quite a number of people. They don't really know what kind of monarch she'll turn out to be. But in any case, with the Imperial En lending a hand in her ascension, the people of Kei are pretty sure she'll turn out to be a good empress."

"So that's the rumor. It's hardly carved in stone that she'll be an enlightened monarch."

"True, but home really is where the heart is. They've got land there and while it might not be great, they can plant their own two feet on their own ground and start a life." Rakushun flashed a wry smile. "There was nothing wrong with getting out of Kei while the getting was good. But when it comes right down to it, life is rough for a refugee in En. It is better than staying behind in a kingdom going to the dogs. And En does its best to take care of people. Seeing how rich En is has got to hurt. Still, the only way to become a citizen of En is to buy land or become a public servant, and neither one of those is easy. Otherwise, if you wanted to settle down in En, you'd have to get hired by a wealthy land owner and work as an itinerant farmer, or get a job in a shop. So people long for their home country."

"Makes sense."

"I've been very fortunate. I was lucky enough to get into the university. The people of Kei are pretty fortunate too, compared to the average refugee elsewhere."

"Really?"

"The Imperial Kei and Imperial En have a good relationship. The Imperial Kei has told the Imperial En to convey her best regards to her subjects and the Imperial En has acknowledged her wishes. That alone is plenty to be thankful for."

He has done much to help resettle the people from Kei back in their home kingdom. It's coming out of the national budgets of both En and Kei, a compromise worked out between the two kingdoms. Though it doesn't make life easier for people from other kingdoms."

"Indeed."

"The Imperial Kei has a lot of things going for her. She's got a strong En watching her back, there to encourage her."

Shoukei wondered what kind of geography Kei had, it being so much further south than Hou. She said, "Do you think the returnees would mind someone who wasn't from Kei coming along with them?"

"I don't think so. They've got no way to check whether you've got a valid passport or not. A lot of people's homes were destroyed and they fled without their papers. Even so, if you want to go to Kei, I'll take you as far as the border."

"Rakushun."

"Tama should be waiting at the next town. The suugu, I mean. That's his name. With Tama, I can fly you to the Koushuu Mountains and be back to Kankyuu in two days."

Shoukei looked out toward the southeast. "You don't have any concerns about my going to Kei?"

"Not at all. Check it out. Go see what it's like."

"I will."

"Once you've seen what you need to see, how about coming back to Kankyuu and filling me in on how things are going there?"

Shoukei nodded.

Chapter 42

[11-2] Shoukou. He killed Seishuu. Huddled in her room in the inn, those three words alone occupied Suzu's mind. *He killed Seishuu.*

"I won't forgive. I won't forget."

Suzu repeated these words over and over to herself. A knock came at the door. It was one of the innkeeper's servants.

"Miss, the gates have opened. Will you be staying on?"

Suzu got out her coin purse. "A little while longer. Here, I'll pay in advance."

It was enough to cover her expenses for five more days. After that, it would take another five days to get to Gyouten.

"Well, okay then," said the servant. He quickly cleaned up the room and left. Suzu watched him go. She stared at the ceiling. "Shoukou. I won't forgive you."

After that, Suzu wandered about the city pretending to be taking a stroll and seeing the sights. She'd randomly greet passers-by and ask them about Shoukou. No one had much to say. It wasn't a subject people felt free to talk about.

She thought at first about bringing charges against him. After walking around the city for five days she realized that would be impossible. Shoukou was a governor with a great deal of power. He controlled Shisui Prefecture. The taxes far exceeded the rate set by the kingdom and the balance disappeared into his pockets. The tax collectors were brutal. The law was a plaything used to punish people on a whim.

As egregious as his actions were, Shoukou hadn't answered for them and wouldn't answer for them. That's what everybody said. He distributed his ill-gotten gains throughout the bureaucracy and bought his own protection.

Her next thought was to travel to Gyouten and directly appeal to the Imperial Kei. It wouldn't be easy arranging an audience with the empress, but she did have her passport with the endorsement of the Imperial Sai.

After five days in the city, she gave up on that too. What she'd learned of

Shoukou's brazen behavior was even worse. The city spilled over with privately resentful voices. Such was the fierceness of Shoukou's grip that none dare voice these feelings aloud.

"Seventy percent or a life," was the expression she heard.

The tax was seventy percent of the harvest. If this payment was short in the slightest, the balance was paid with a life. The head of the farmer himself or the head of one of his family.

Shoukou went hunting in the hamlets, they said. When he was in one of his moods, he'd go to a farming village in the outlying districts and kidnap girls. A few days later he'd toss them out like a bundle of old rags.

At times, merchants came from the borders of Kou and ships arrived from Tai carrying human cargo. He deceived itinerants and refugees from the faltering kingdoms into coming to Shisui to replace those that had died beneath his lash. Wagons and ships traveled to the kingdoms bearing food and provisions and distributed it to families who had lost their homes and land. Those receiving the goods believed that the governor dispatching the wagons and ships to be a compassionate man. In the place of the provisions, people were carried on the return trip. Travelers lured by the promise of land and citizenship would curse their terrible folly only afterwards.

Why, Suza asked herself with almost unbridled fury. Why would the Imperial Kei keep such a beast as a public servant?

Rumors abounded on the streets. The reason Shoukou could persecute the people so, the reason he was never called to account, was because he had somebody covering for him. Probably somebody in Gyouten. Somebody in Kinpa Palace. Somebody at the top.

The Late Empress Yo had been in on it, or so the rumors went.

She had no interest in governing the kingdom, that was why. The ministers and government officials did whatever they wanted and nobody gave a damn. Kiss a little ass, throw a little jewelry and silk around, and she'd look the other way.

Because she was a woman, the people of Takuhou said. Kei had bad luck with empresses. They never governed in peace.

Suzu laughed to herself. An empress from Yamato, the one person in the world who would understand her. A monarch filled with gentleness and compassion.

What a joke.

The Imperial Kei had been her best and last hope, the one thing that kept her going. *I want to meet her*, Suzu had told herself over and over again. What an idiot she'd been.

"I won't forgive any of them. Shoukou or the Imperial Kei."

Suzu left Takuhou and headed for Gyouten. As expected, it took her five days. Using her bank book, she withdrew the balance of the funds. It'd raise eyebrows when the Imperial Sai found out but at this point Suzu didn't care.

The first thing she did was search out a licensed arms merchant.

Striking a youma with an ordinary sword would only break the blade and not scratch the youma. Youma hunting required weapons cast with a special spell. Because they were only made by the Minister of Winter, they were called winter weapons (*touki*). On the door to the shop was the official seal authorizing them to make such armaments.

Licensed arms merchants were also the only dealers in the chains and ropes used to capture and train youma and other you-beasts. Suzu recalled traveling often to an arms merchant at the base of Mt. Ha in the southwest kingdom of Sai to buy military-grade tack for the groom who took care of Setsuko, Riyou's flying tiger.

And unlike ordinary dealers, these arms merchants carried a class of weapons not widely known to the public—weapons that could kill a wizard. A governor was a class of baron and thus a full-fledged wizard. Only a particular kind of sword could mortally wound him.

Suzu browsed around the shop and selected a dagger. She didn't know how to use one but she knew she'd need it. Arms merchants rarely sold *touki* to customers. This was one time when the endorsement of the Imperial Sai on her passport came in handy.

She next went to an establishment that specialized in pegasi and flying beasts. She didn't need a horse or ox. What she needed was a mount much faster than a

horse, a pegasus that could leap over any fence or barrier.

Flying youma were captured by wild game hunters in the Yellow Sea, where youma abounded in great numbers. Game hunters were called *corpse hunters* because they spent as much time tracking down the bodies of fellow hunters killed by youma as they did the youma themselves. The job of a corpse hunter was to capture youma, break them, and deliver them to a wrangler. Youma wranglers worked hand-in-hand with death. The animals didn't come cheap. Capture a top of the line youma like a suugu, break and train it, and a hunter would be set for life.

Suzu entered the shop. A middle-aged man in the shop was turning through the pages of a ledger. He said, "Welcome."

He only raised his eyes when he spoke. A scar ran from the top of his head to his right cheek. His right eye was caved in.

"I'm looking for a pegasus."

"How much?" *Are you willing to spend?* he meant.

Suzu placed the bank notes on the table. "Whatever I can get for this."

"You want one that flies or one that's fast?"

"One that flies. And one that heeds commands well."

"You ever been on a bird youma?"

Riding a bird youma was no simple task. "No. I'd prefer a horse."

"In that case, a *sansui* is the best I can do for you."

"What kind of beast is a sansui?"

"A horse with a blue coat. It doesn't really have what it takes to fly at altitude but it's got strong legs. Handy for leaping over the occasional river. Not exactly fleet-footed. Three times faster than your regular horse but gets winded quick. If that's okay with you, I've got a real gentle one."

Suzu nodded. "Sounds fine."

"Where you staying?" the man asked.

Flying youma were not kept in the city. Suzu gave him her name and the inn

she was staying at.

"I'll bring it to you. The whole thing takes seven days. To get it to you any quicker I'd have to run it, and it being a sansui you'd have to rest it a day. After that, it needs time changing owners."

"Seven days suits me fine."

"Half down, half on delivery."

Suzu nodded. "It's a deal. I'll be waiting."

And so she waited at the inn, portioning out the remainder of her funds to leave herself enough to eat. This was the Gyouten she had so longed for, the city that blanketed the terraced slopes of Mt. Ryou-un. She wasn't impressed. It didn't mean anything without Seishuu there with her.

Seishuu, welcome to Gyouten.

High up at the top of Mt. Ryou-un was the Imperial Palace. In the palace lived the Imperial Kei, the damned fool of a monarch who let a man like Shoukou live.

Suzu grasped the dagger inside her blouse. She'd gut Shoukou with it and head back to Gyouten ahead of the news. Using the Imperial Sai's endorsement on her passport, she'd arrange for an audience with the Imperial Kei.

They'd squeal like stuck pigs. Shoukou and the Imperial Kei—they'd picked the wrong child of Kei to kill.

As promised, the sansui was delivered seven days later. The stable boy handed Suzu the scent ball. Inside the scent ball was a burning incense stick. It had a little buckle to attach to a belt or sash. Inside the ball was the incense prepared by the youma dealer. The wrangler used this burning incense to tame the youma. When the youma was sold to another person, it'd be charmed by the smell of the incense and would not get alarmed. After that, the intensity of the incense was slowly reduced until the animal was acclimated to the scent of its owner.

But Suzu didn't have much interest in any of this and didn't bother to remember much of it. Once she'd made it back to Gyouten, the thing could drop dead for all she cared.

Suzu stayed on in Gyouten for three more days while she and the sansui got

used to each other. Then she headed back to Shisui Prefecture and Takuhou.

Seishuu, soon I'll have your revenge. Shoukou and the Imperial Kei will feel what you felt in spades.

Chapter 43

[11-3] Youko finished her morning chores and sent Enho's charges off to school. The school here didn't have an age limit so Rangyoku attended along with Keikei. The main subjects were reading, writing and arithmetic. Children could go to school starting from the age of seven (counting a child as one at birth and a year older on each New Year), or five (counting birthdays on date of birth).

Because there was no formal graduation, adults could attend as well and often came with babes in arms.

It was a pretty laid-back atmosphere. The main thing stressed was that the talk be about something more constructive than mere gossip. But as a consequence, open attendance was allowed only during the time that the villagers returned from the hamlets to the town. The school itself was closed from spring until fall. Anybody wishing to attend otherwise had to get a recommendation from the superintendent (who was also the principal).

Youko lingered behind in the now vacant orphanage and fretted about the girl named Suzu. What should she do? Go to Takuhou to look for her? She'd sent Hankyo off to Gyouten and he still hadn't returned. That was another reason for her hesitation. As she prepared lunch, she turned the whole thing over in her mind, wondering what to do.

"Hey, Youshi!" said Keikei.

Enho always left with Keikei and Rangyoku and returned together. Keikei ran ahead and got home first.

"Welcome back."

"You got a guest!"

"I do?"

"Yeah," Keikei nodded.

Youko glanced over her shoulder as Rangyoku walked in with Enho. Without a

word, Rangyoku looked at Youko and grinned. “At the Eika Inn next to the dragon gate.”

“An inn?”

Rangyoku giggled and went into the kitchen. She pulled Youko over to a secluded area by the wall. “It’s a guy.”

Youko raised her eyebrows. The first image that popped into her head was the man she’d met at that shady tavern in Takuhou. “Was it perhaps a rather grim-looking man? A big man?”

“More of a slender physique.”

“About fourteen or fifteen?” If it wasn’t the big man then maybe the boy who had intervened on her behalf.

Rangyoku gave Youko a teasing scowl. “Oh, stop it! I can’t believe you’d forget a good-looking guy like that! He said to tell you that your *servant* had arrived. You’d know who it was.”

Youko’s eyes flew wide open.

“Wow, I mean, your *servant*! That’s so incredible!”

Youko hastily waved her hands, batting away the implications. “Don’t be ridiculous! It’s nothing like that!”

“Ah, you’re blushing. Must be a really neat guy. He was dressed so fine!”

“No, no, no. Oh, all right, what exactly did he have to say?”

“So you *do* know him. You two must be really close.” Rangyoku laughed out loud. She rolled up her sleeves and went to the water barrel. “Well, you better go right away and find out. And if you’re not going to be back tonight, be sure to let us know!”

“I figured it was you,” Youko said when she walked into the guest suite at the inn and recognized the prim face.

He opened his eyes suspiciously and leaned forward. Then quickly and politely bowed. The cloak fell from his shoulders.

“Forgive me for beckoning you here.”

He certainly did present himself well. Compared to his usual attire, he had about himself an air of frugality. But that was because he couldn't very well show up here in full ministerial dress.

"That was some way of getting my attention."

"Eh?"

The bellhop who'd showed her to the room gave her a meaningful look. He left the room and wordlessly closed the doors behind him.

Youko let out a deep sigh. "Forget it," she said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. From next to her ankles she heard what sounded like snickering laughter. "Oh, Hankyo. You know, you could have sent Hankyo for me."

"I wished to see what kind of place this orphanage was. Should I not have?"

"Hey, fine with me. So, Keiki, why come all the way here?"

Keiki took a scroll from the stationery box resting on his knees and rolled it out on the table. "Do you have your Imperial Seal?"

"Do I have my what?" Youko shook her head and grinned. "Sorry, didn't bring it with me."

"Some paperwork that needs to be taken care of. Tomorrow, I'll have Hankyo go fetch it."

"Okay."

She took each of the documents from a stationery box. Although she'd left everything in Keiki's care, the decrees of high government officials still required the Imperial Seal. She unwound the scrolls and scanned the text. She could hardly read a word so she couldn't do much more than skim over it. She'd have to get Keiki to read it aloud for her in order to understand it.

"And how is the rike?"

"What? Oh, it's great. Enho's a good man and I love the kids."

"That is good to know."

"Which isn't to mean I don't have any concerns," Youko muttered.

"Ah," said Keiki, lowering his voice. "As for your inquiries about Shoukou, I

examined the civil service records and asked around the ministries. He is the governor of Shisui Prefecture in Wa Province. A high-ranking official with a poor reputation.”

“Seems to be a lot of that in Wa Province: Marquis Gahou, Governor Shoukou.”

“He has crossed the line many times. The ministers are desperate to discipline him. But no matter what happens Gahou watches his back and covers everything up.”

“Enho calls Gahou a jackal who shed its tail.”

“A fair description.”

“Fortunately, Shisui happens to be close by. I was curious to see for myself what this Shoukou was like. I’d also like to check out the capital of Wa Province.”

“You shouldn’t be taking unnecessary risks.”

“I don’t. I’ll be careful.”

Keiki gave Youko a sideways glance. “Really? I can smell blood on you.”

“Eh?” Youko sniffed at her sleeves.

“It is blood, is it not? Though I do not wish to imply that Your Highness was the cause of it.”

“Oh, that’s right. I came across an accident. It happened a few days ago. Can you still smell it?”

“It strikes me as the blood of an innocent, spilled without a curse, so it is not acrid. I do worry for your well being.”

Accursed blood. Youko smiled darkly to herself. Keiki used that description often when she was battling the pretender. No matter how much magnanimity she displayed, when she killed someone or ordered their death, the malice and bitterness in the blood hung like a fog around her. Kirin could not abide blood, and the scent of such accursed blood pained them.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Keiki—and all kirin—ate nothing tinged with blood. They weren’t forced to

reject it out of hand. But even foods fried or sautéed in suet would harm their bodies. According to Rokuta, that was why kirin swept away to Yamato never lived long. The shortened lifespan of a kirin without an emperor was approximately thirty years. A kirin in Yamato could last maybe a third of that.

Such were the kind of creatures that kirin were.

"Really. I can take care of myself."

"I earnestly pray that you will."

"So, how are things going in Gyouten?" Youko asked, with a bit of forced cheerfulness.

Keiki responded with a dour expression. He said, "Without Your Highness there . . ." and sighed.

As usual, the warring ministers had divided the court into two factions. Although Seikyou—the previous Chousai—had lost *de facto* authority and Taisai—leader of the opposition—had died, things had pretty much stayed the same. Left with no real authority of consequence to toss around, Keiki's sense was that they had less interest in governance than in fighting petty turf battles.

The things some people were saying as if true: fearing regicide, the empress fled to Yamato. She'd sought refuge in En. She'd hidden herself deeply within the palace compound. Others went so far as to say she had been kidnapped by Marquis Koukan of Baku Province. Contained in every rumor was the criticism that she'd abandoned the throne, and grave doubts that she would ever return.

As Keiki explained all this, Youko took a breath and let it out. "I see."

"And there are those who claim that because things were not going the way you desired at the palace, you grew frustrated and appealed to the Imperial En and will henceforth staff the court with bureaucrats from En."

"What?" said Youko. She bit her lip and then cynically laughed. "Of course. Without the help of the Imperial En, they think I couldn't have done a thing by myself."

It was true, though. And it vexed her, having to depend on others like this.

"I consider it all nonsense. But perhaps you have entertained such thoughts?"

Youko felt a shiver go through her. “Why ask me a question like that?” Her green eyes darkened. “Is this something you have your own doubts about?”

Feeling the weight of her displeasure, Keiki unconsciously averted his gaze. He who could stare down a youma could not look his lord in the eye.

“At least *you* have to believe in me.”

“Forgive me.”

“Look, no one has less faith in me than myself. More than anybody else, I doubt my qualifications to be empress. There have been rulers who let these doubts and suspicions overcome them and fell from the Way. That is why, if nobody else in this world believes me, *you* have to.”

“Yes,” he said with a bow.

Youko opened the scroll in her hand. “Do you have to return right away?”

“A quick return would be problematic. I have supposedly traveled to En.”

Youko grinned. “Of course. How’d you like to take a trip to Takuhou?”

“Takuhou in Shisui Prefecture, I take it.”

Youko nodded. “The capital of Wa Province, what is it again?”

“You mean, Meikaku?”

“Yeah. I’m thinking of going to Meikaku and stopping by Takuhou on the way. I’d like to see what things are like in Wa Province. You can be my tour guide.”

“Yes, but . . .” Keiki hesitated.

Once again her eyes darkened. “I’d like you to see it too, Keiki. I want you to see the Kei you don’t see from the palace.”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s straighten out all this paperwork. Sorry, but would you read it aloud to me?”

Chapter 44

[11-4] “Enho,” Youko called out. She stopped in front of the screen doors to the study.

“Is that you, Youko?” came the warm reply.

“Excuse me,” she said, and walked in. Enho was sitting at his desk by the window. He glanced over his shoulder at her. She said, “Sorry, but could I have a few minutes of your time?”

“Go ahead. What’s on your mind?”

It was as if he’d anticipated her concerns. Youko smiled nervously. “I was thinking of going to see the capital of Wa Province.”

“Meikaku. So you’ve developed an interest in Wa?”

“Yes,” she answered honestly. “Rangyoku says that she’d rather arrange a marriage of convenience than accept a homestead in Wa. Better to marry and then get divorced. That got me curious about what makes Wa Province such a rotten place. I’d like to keep her from having to do something like that. Rangyoku would surely not do it because she wants to. That conditions in this kingdom could drive someone to . . .”

Enho suddenly smiled. Taken somewhat aback, Youko queried, “Enho?”

“I see. Marriage is a more conservative tradition in Japan.” He motioned to her, and as she usually did, Youko sat down in the chair next to him. “You needn’t fret that much over this. Marriage is not so weighty an institution here. Tell me, why do people get married in Japan?”

“Um . . . because it’s lonely all by yourself.”

“And that’s why people feel it necessary to get married? It’s certainly true that living without a spouse is lonely. So people want somebody to be close to. Here it’s called a common law marriage.”

“Well, I guess there’s the problem with children.”

“In this world, children are only born when a petition is brought to the riboku.

You must be married to do so, else the Rishi will not allow it. But if you simply wish to live with someone, formal marriage is not necessary.”

“Ah.”

“If you want children, you have to get married. Otherwise, a common law marriage will do. In order to petition for a child, a couple must reside in the same town and attend the same Rishi. That’s pretty much the way it works. So if you get married, you have to move. One of them has to move to the other’s city. Splitting up by itself doesn’t mean they’ll have to move back to the town they came from. And if their current hometown is an unwelcoming place, they may seek out relatives elsewhere.”

“So you can move to different kingdoms that way?”

“Yes, you can. But you have to transfer your census registry to the same kingdom as your spouse. You can’t marry a citizen of another kingdom. This is one of the Divine Decrees and must be observed. To ask for children, you must be married and residing in the same town, and to get married you must both be citizens of the same kingdom.”

Enho flashed a knowing smile. “When it comes to the riboku, there is no other way but to petition Tentei. It possibly has to do with the same reason that an emperor must be from the kingdom he rules. Apparently, there was once an emperor who solemnized a marriage between a man and woman from different kingdoms. Even though they went to the riboku and tied a ribbon to the branch, they were never given a child. Eventually they dissolved the union. The Reason of the World rejected them.”

“That is strange,” Youko said to herself.

Enho smiled nonchalantly. “In Japan, God is not necessary. But here, God is. Tentei is necessary for the logic and reason of the world to work. Are you familiar with the first of the Divine Decrees?”

“The temporal world must be ruled with humanity and according to the Way.”

“Correct. Turn your back on the Way and you will inevitably oppress the people. There is an absolute cost for straying from the Way. You can turn your back on the Divine Decrees and establish your own laws but they will never work

to your satisfaction. The Reason of the World is woven into the Divine Decrees. As it says in the legends, Tentei Himself handed down the Divine Decrees to us."

"Makes sense." *Such a strange world this is*, Youko once again thought to herself.

"Based on what you have told me, marriage in Japan is designed for the protection of the family. It is a system structured to preserve the integrity of the family bloodline. Here, though, there is nothing like a family bloodline. When a child turns twenty, he leaves the household. No matter how wealthy a person might become, that wealth cannot be passed on to his children. When a person turns sixty, his land and house are transferred back to the kingdom. If he wishes, he may hold onto it for the entirety of his life, yet it cannot be left to anyone upon his death. Accumulated savings can only be bequeathed to a spouse, and even then, only the wealth generated by the both of them. When the spouse dies, it is all transferred back to the kingdom. In turn, no matter how poor a person might be, it becomes the kingdom's responsibility to feed them if they can't feed themselves."

"Well, then, why have children in the first place?"

Enho smiled. "Tentei looks to the hearts of the parents and gives them children accordingly. In other words, becoming parents is Heaven's way of recognizing their qualities as human beings. At night, it's said that the souls of children slip away from their bodies and fly to the Five Sacred Mountains, where they tell Tentei how their parents are treating them. After death, that is how people are judged."

"Could that perhaps be seen in religious terms?"

"Better to view it in ethical or moral terms. The rearing of the child given you brings you closer to virtue, closer to the Way. In fact, there is no profit in having a child. It takes time and money."

"So that is why a child leaves home at the age of twenty."

"That is the case. That is why parents devote themselves to their children. To despise a child is to despise Heaven. By serving their children they are serving Heaven."

“I see.”

“It must seem strange to you. It would seem strange to anybody who thinks of pedigree in terms of bloodline. The closest thing to a pedigree is a surname. A marriage may be registered under either spouse’s census records. Your own name doesn’t change but the records are unified under one or the other’s name. The child thus inherits the name registered under that unified record. The significance of this is that when the incumbent emperor is found lacking in moral virtue and a change of dynasties is carried out, a person of the same surname cannot accept the Divine Mandate.”

“Huh.”

“The originally registered name of the previous Imperial Kei, the Late Empress Yo, was Jo. And your parents did not have the surname of Jo. In the case of Kou, the surname of the previous emperor was Chou. Therefore, the next emperor will not carry the surname of Chou. The emperor of Hou has fallen. His surname was Son. You can be assured that the next ruler of Hou will not be a Son.”

“I see. So that means that my friend Rakushun could never become emperor of Kou.”

“If his surname is Chou, then throughout all history I know of no case when it has ever happened. It is the unalterable Reason of the World. You cannot change the name you were born with. Even if your parents divorce, it does not change. When you marry, it does not change. That is why people have what is called an *inherent* family name. It’s the only real function and meaning of the family name.”

“That is completely different from common practice in Japan.”

“Indeed,” Enho laughed. “In Japan, it seems that once people get married, they’re determined to stick it out one way or another. Here, people get married and divorced on quite a regular basis, with no qualms about raising other people’s children. In fact, remarrying with stepchildren is highly regarded. Perhaps because the more children you have, the more blessed you must be. To become a parent in the first place you must have a certain quality of character.”

“I see.”

"At the end of the day, there are also people who don't wish for children. Because there is no necessity for them to marry, they settle for a common law marriage. Because getting married involves a vexing amount of paperwork, those who have given up on children accept the situation and make do with a common law marriage. It's not uncommon for such arrangement to take place even while maintaining separate households. But if you're unwise enough to take as a partner someone who doesn't live in your general vicinity, you're unlikely to meet except during the winter."

"Right."

"It's more complicated when a couple are also civil servants. When you work for the government, obviously you have to move. You wouldn't get married to get split apart, so the road to advancement would necessarily be limited. To prevent such a disagreeable outcome, many avoid marriage."

"Really?"

If that was true, then there must be a lot of single people amongst the ministers. Those deciding to marry would be unlikely to choose a civil servant as a spouse.

"To the people of this world, such are the limits of marriage. It is important to those who want children, and lacking in significance to those who do not."

"Huh," said Youko, taking a breath. And right now, getting a partition in the right place was more important to Rangyoku than having a child. That was the extent of the problem.

"It really is different," she said to herself, and then hung her head. "But can I get married?"

Enho forced a smile. "The ruler of a kingdom is not a human being."

"I'm not . . . I guess."

"If you were already married, technically speaking, once you ascended to the throne the marriage would be annulled and become a common law marriage. Consequently, you can't have children. However, you can bestow the rank of imperial consort upon a companion, such as empress consort or prince. Your children, Youko, are the citizens of Kei. You serve Heaven by serving them. A

married couple serves Heaven by rearing their children. There is no difference."

"I guess not," she said with a nod.

Enho smiled. "Go wherever you must. It is well and proper that you see to the welfare of your children."

Youko bowed. "Starting tomorrow, then, I shall ask for your leave."

Youko rolled over on her bed and stared at the ceiling. *Your children are the citizens of Kei. You serve Heaven by serving them.*

Back in Japan, she had never given much thought to God. She had a hard time grasping what the existence of a god like Tentei was supposed to mean to her. "Serving God" was a concept she was not familiar with. She sighed deeply.

She heard from somewhere the sound of a firm voice. "Your Highness . . . there are men."

"What?"

Begging her pardon, Hankyo's presence vanished and then shortly reappeared. "There are at least five men outside the rike."

Youko got up. "Who are they?"

"I do not know. Ah, they have left."

"Follow them."

"By your command," said Hankyo and slipped away.

Hankyo was back the next morning. "They spent the night in Hokui, left the gates this morning, and were looking for a wagon going to Takuhou."

Youko fastened the straps of her knapsack. "Then I've got to go back to Takuhou and see for myself what's going on."

Part XII

Chapter 45

[12-1] “Hey, Suzu.”

She was wandering around looking for an inn when she heard a familiar voice behind her. Because of the sansui, she had to stay at an inn with stables. According to the man who'd sold it to her, stealing a pegasus was a serious crime. But they were so valuable that plenty of thieves would risk it. Pretty sure there ought to be an inn with stables that wasn't all that expensive, she set off for the neighborhood where she'd stayed before.

She turned around. There amidst the bustle of people was the boy she'd met at the cemetery. “It's you . . .”

He slipped through the throng piling up at the gates before closing and ran over to her. “You came back? Why?”

Suzu tilted her head to the side. “What are you asking for?”

“You went somewhere, didn't you? You left the inn. I thought you'd taken off for good.”

Suzu remembered that his name was Sekki. “How do you know what inn I was staying at?”

On the day they had met, he hadn't come with her to the inn. They'd gone their separate ways on the main boulevard.

Sekki shrugged guiltily. “Ah, sorry. I tailed you.”

“Why?”

“I was worried about you. I thought you might try to get back at Shoukou.”

Suzu gulped. “Don't be silly.”

“So you're fine, then? And the pegasus? You went to buy it?”

“Yeah. I got tired of traveling by wagon. I don't have to worry about carrying a

sick kid around any more.” She laughed cynically and Sekki looked away. She said, “Fine by me. So, do you know a cheap inn with stables?”

She didn’t have much left in her purse and inns with stables weren’t that common.

Sekki raised his head. “I live at an inn. It’s a bit run down and it doesn’t have stables. But the back yard should be big enough for a pegasus. But that’s okay, ‘cause nobody’s going to steal anything from us.” He took hold of her hand. “You can stay with us. Besides, our rates are good.”

Sekki’s house was located in a run-down block of the city. Men loitering along the way gave Suzu and the sansui suspicious glances as they passed by.

Leading the sansui along, Suzu asked, “You’re sure this is okay? It looks like a pretty dangerous neighborhood.”

Sekki grinned. “No worries. Ah, here we are.”

Suzu looked in the direction he was pointing. The building was an old but well-kept inn. Sekki ran ahead to the side of the entrance, opened the wooden door, and motioned to her to follow. “Let’s go in here.”

Inside the door was an alleyway where barrels and buckets were stored. Through the alleyway was a small courtyard and vegetable garden. Sekki pointed at the hedge. “You can tie it up there. Do you know what it eats?”

“Hay and fodder.”

“We’ll get some for you. In the meantime, we can water it.”

Sekki went to the well and lowered a bucket into the water. At that moment, the back door opened and a man appeared there. He was so tall she had to look up at him.

“What are you doing with a fine beast like that, Sekki?” His eyes focused on Suzu. He gave her a very suspicious look. Hauling up the bucket, Sekki turned and smiled at him. He said, “It’s hers. She’s staying here. I told you before, remember? The girl I met in the cemetery.”

“Ah,” the man said, nodding. He grinned broadly, a friendly smile. “Yeah, that was pretty awful. Come in. The place is something of a dump, though.”

“Do you also work at this inn?”

Suzu was shown into the kitchen and invited to sit down. She politely took a seat. The man dipped a ladle into a big pot, filled the teacup and set it down in front of her. He cut a pretty rough figure as a waiter.

“I guess you could say I’m the landlord. In fact, it’s Sekki that’s keeping the books.”

“You’re his older brother?”

“Yeah. And he works me like a dog.” He laughed in a loud voice. “I’m Koshou. And you are?”

“Suzu Ooki.”

“That’s an odd-sounding name.”

“I’m a kaikyaku.”

“Hoh,” he said, a surprised look in his eyes.

Suzu was surprised, too. To be honest, claiming to be a kaikyaku hardly aroused any feelings in people at all. When she thought back about it now, whenever she said that she was a kaikyaku, she kept expecting something dramatic to happen.

“Must have been rough.”

Suzu shook her head. She hadn’t suffered much during her journeys. She was healthy, and even though her parents had died long ago, she hadn’t been chased out of her hometown. Her life was still her own and that was no small thing.

“Koshou, you shouldn’t entertain guests in the kitchen.” Sekki walked in and gave his older brother a playful glare.

“Oh, this is okay, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. Now, go find out where we can get hay or fodder.”

“Okay, okay,” Koshou replied cheerfully. He smiled at her and left.

Watching him leave, Sekki sighed. “Sorry. My big brother really isn’t much of a gentleman.”

"It's fine. Sorry about making you run around looking for fodder. I don't want you to go to too much trouble."

"Don't worry about it," Sekki laughed. "Let me show you to your room. Please forgive the fact that it's a tad unkempt."

Despite being located in this neighborhood, the inn had guests. There were four guest rooms. In the three days Suzu had been staying there, occupants had come and gone. A bunch of men hung out in the tavern on the first floor. They weren't exactly a high-class bunch and they (and the occasional woman) seemed to be there all the time, talking together in hushed voices. The house across the alleyway also saw a lot of comings and goings.

This is a strange inn, Suzu thought as she straightened her things. After some thought, she placed her purse with what few coins remained on top of her bags. She slung a long, thin pack over her shoulder. In the darkened courtyard, she saddled up the sansui.

"You going out at this hour?" asked Koshou, coming out of the house.

Suzu nodded. "I thought I'd go for a walk."

"The gates are closed. Where you going?"

Suzu didn't answer. Koshou leaned forward and gave her a hard look. "Take care," he said, with a wave of his hand. The light from the kitchen glittered dully off the ring on his finger.

Suzu bowed her head, took up the reins, and turned toward the alley.

Oh, yes, it's from a chain, she thought, settling into the saddle. The thin ring that Koshou wore, it was the link of chain. The slender strand of steel just big enough to wrap around a finger—it would be otherwise linked together to form a chain belt. She'd seen them decorating the leather belts that the less-privileged classes wore. They'd obviously taken one apart and wore the links on their fingers. A short chain like that hung in a corner of the kitchen like a talisman.

Sekki wears one, too.

Not only Sekki. Now and then, a man she passed in the hallway did, or one of

the men lounging around the tavern. Perhaps most or all of the people coming in and out of the inn.

She felt like she'd chanced across something strange and curious. Feeling a touch of melancholy, she exited onto the main thoroughfare. It was already night, and even the number of drunks on the street had begun to decrease.

The prefectoral hall was located in the center of the city. The prefectoral offices occupied the grounds within the fortress walls that surrounded the palace-like complex. On the inner loop road that ran around the walls was a large mansion facing eastwards.

Shoukou, the governor of Shisui Prefecture, the beast of Takuhou.

He had an official residence within the inner palace. A second residence, a large house in Takuhou's second district. And a huge estate in the countryside outside Takuhou.

Suzu had recently taken to walking down this street. She'd determined that of his three residences, he was currently staying at the one on the inner loop road. The estate in the countryside was solely for entertaining invited guests. The house on the inner loop road was for when he had work to attend to at the prefectoral hall. The third house seemed to be reserved for other occasions. This meant the beast was up to his usual tricks at the prefectoral offices. She couldn't begin to imagine what sort of sinister plans he was cooking up, but they wouldn't be for the benefit of the people of Shisui.

Suzu cast a cold look at the house and rode the sansui to the street corner. On the grounds of a deserted Taoist temple, she dismounted and sat down in an inconspicuous spot with a view of the currently-closed gate of the temple.

Now we wait, Seishuu.

She reached inside her vest and touched the handle of the dagger tucked into the sash of her kimono. The blade could cut a youma apart. It could cut apart a wizard as well. She had already determined that the sansui could vault the wall inside the loop road. Anything that could jump over that wall could easily trespass the wall of the house. If the master of the house was present, he would be sleeping in the back. And, in fact, at the back of the building that faced the road was a luxurious, multistoried house.

I will make him feel our bitterness and pain.

She hugged her arms tightly around her knees.

Chapter 46

[12-2] In the dead of night, Suzu led the sansui to the inner loop road. She turned down an alleyway adjacent to Shoukou's house and stared up at the multistoried building rising over the wall.

She'd leap across the wall and charge into the building. She would dispatch Shoukou and then jump down onto the road and head for Gyouten. There she would arrange an audience with the Imperial Kei.

I won't forgive them. Not Shoukou and not the Imperial Kei.

She repeated the words as if to convince herself and took up the reins of the sansui.

A hand closed over hers. "No."

Suzu sprang back, colliding with the sansui. The sansui neighed a discontented growl. She looked behind her. The shadow at her back had the height and width of a boulder.

"Koshou."

Another person appeared behind her and tore the reins from her grasp. A man she recalled seeing at the inn.

"Why—?"

It just wasn't Koshou and the other man. A number of others were hiding in the shadows along the narrow alleyway.

Koshou softly wrapped Suzu on the knuckles. He said in a low voice, "Shoukou isn't the only one inside that house. There's guards all over the place. You gonna kill all of them?" He pulled on her arm. "C'mon. We're going home."

"No. Let me go."

Koshou glared at her. "If Shoukou finds out you've been staying with us, we're all dead men."

Suzu caught her breath.

"They wouldn't kill you right then and there. That's the problem. It'd cause all kind of trouble."

"I—"

Suzu looked at the building rising over the wall and then back at Koshou. She hadn't intended to cause Sekki or Koshou any grief, but right there in front of her was the house of the enemy.

Koshou patted her on the back. "I know how you feel, kid. So I'm asking you to come back with us."

Men were camped out in front of the inn. When Suzu returned together with Koshou, Sekki ran up to them holding a lantern. He said, "Suzu . . . thank God."

The men echoed this opinion. Suzu bowed to them. Koshou again patted her on the back. He said, "Sorry about this, everybody. But we brought her back okay."

The crowd sighed in relief. As they left in ones and twos, they patted her on the back as well.

"Good to see you're okay."

"Now, don't you be going off half-cocked like that."

"Gave us a hell of a fright, girl."

She had really put Koshou and the rest of them in a tight spot. But as she watched them walk away, the lack of censure in their voices perplexed her.

At Koshou's prodding, Suzu went into the inn and sat down in the tavern. One of the men took the sansui around back.

A number of men were in the kitchen. Ten more came into the tavern with her. An older man hurried out of the kitchen and placed a steaming teacup in front of her. She realized that her body was chilled to the core and her teeth were chattering. She wrapped her hands around the teacup and warmed her frozen hands.

"So," said Koshou, resting his hands on the table and looking down at her. Her eyes focused on the steel ring on his finger. "You hate Shoukou?"

Suzu tore her eyes away from the ring and looked up. "I hate him."

"You're not the only one. Not the only one who knows what it's like to have that kind of hate in your heart. You got yourself a mean weapon there. Do you even know how to use it? What exactly did you think you were going to do to Shoukou?"

"I—"

"Do you know how many bodyguards he's got in that house? And how many of them you'd have to fight to get to his room?"

She bowed her head.

"Suzu, it ain't possible. He's not the kind of enemy that anybody can take down in a fit of rage."

"But—!"

His eyes softened. "It's really too bad about the kid."

Suzu stared up at him. Her vision blurred. All at once, everything bottled up inside her came pouring out. "Seishuu . . ." she sobbed. "He was . . . really sick. And I killed him. He had to run away from Kei and escaped to Kou. Then his village in Kou was destroyed and he had to run away again. His dad got killed by a youma right in front of him and then his mom died. He was sick from getting wounded by the youma. He was really, really sick. A little scratch like that and he suffered so much."

"I know." Koshou patted her tightly clenched hands.

"I was going to find a cure for him. We were on our way to Gyouten. He just got worse and worse every morning. No matter what he ate, he couldn't keep it down. He was getting so thin. He couldn't walk straight, could hardly see . . ."

The hot tears burned down her cheeks. "I shouldn't have let him there. I was looking for an inn, but I should have carried him with me. If I had, he wouldn't have ended up getting killed."

He was so thin he weighed hardly anything at all.

"I shouldn't have come here in the first place. I should have taken him to a doctor in another city."

"Don't hate yourself so, Suzu," Sekki said. Suzu turned to him. He sat next to her, watching her intently. He said, "You hate yourself more than you hate Shoukou. More than punishing Shoukou, you want to punish yourself."

Suzu blinked. "Yes. That's true." The tears continued to well up, falling like rain. "I shouldn't have left him there. I shouldn't have come here. It's my fault. If only I hadn't brought him with me!"

She'd been all wrapped up in her fantasies, and Seishuu had died because of it. "He didn't want to die. Oh, he never stopped cracking wise about it, but he was scared about dying, too. But he did. It's my fault, and there's no fixing it now. It's no use saying I'm sorry or asking for forgiveness now!"

Wracked by sobs, she couldn't speak for a long moment.

"That girl, she told me that he forgave me. But I don't forgive me!"

"But, Suzu, no matter how hard you struggle and suffer, you can't resurrect the dead. That's just the way it is."

"But—!"

"What you tried to do would have amounted to nothing, and that's wrong. If all you are is your anger and resentment, if you think it's okay to kill people to revenge a personal grudge, then you're no better a murderer than Shoukou."

"So you're saying I should forgive him? I've heard what kind of person he is. He's made lots of people suffer just like Seishuu. That's why I was going to kill him. You expect me to forgive something like that?"

Koshou slapped her on the back. "Didn't say nothing about forgiving him." When she looked up, he laughed. "Show your hate for Shoukou and you'll taste his retribution. That's what everybody's afraid of, why they all keep their mouths shut. See no evil, hear no evil. But don't you be thinking there's nothing but cowards in Shisui."

"Koshou, you . . . "

Suzu raised her head. She glanced at Sekki. Then at the men in the tavern who were all quietly watching over her.

"All of you . . . "

They all wore those same steel rings.

"Shoukou will fall. We're waiting for the right moment. We were afraid you were going to tip our hand." Koshou took a chain from his jacket pocket. He unfastened a link from the chain and presented it to Suzu. "Forget Shoukou and go somewhere else and live a carefree life. Or take this." He added, a severe expression on his face, "But if you do, you may never remove it. Betray us and be prepared to accept the consequences."

"Give it to me." Suzu reached out her hand. "I'll never betray you. I'll do whatever it takes to free myself—and Seishuu—from this grudge!"

Chapter 47

[12-3] Shoukei climbed Mt. Koushuu to the border of En and Kei and entered Kei. The name of the city at the border checkpoint was Gantou. Thanks to Rakushun, she had no problems crossing the border.

“Take care.”

Parting with her in the Kei part of the city, Rakushun returned to En. Shoukei watched him leave and couldn’t help but hang her head and say, “Thank you.”

He’d arranged a passport for her and gave her traveling money out of his own pocket. He’d given her a lot. He’d brought her this far and hadn’t begrimed her a thing. She couldn’t begin to thank him.

“Oh, damn,” she said to herself, as Rakushun’s waving tail faded out of view. She hadn’t thanked him in person. She’d never apologized to anyone. Back in Hou, back in the sticks, she’d groveled to Gobo. In the palace in Kyou, she’d groveled to the Imperial Kyou. But never with any sincerity. She’d never thanked anybody from the bottom of her heart. She hadn’t even been sorry about it.

When she raised her head again, Rakushun was gone from the finely-maintained streets of En. He was probably already on the suugu and galloping back to Kankuu.

She took a breath and cast a glance back over her shoulder. The kind of differences she saw at the border of En and Kei were not dissimilar to those at the border of Ryuu and En.

So this is Kei.

The city straddled the summit of the Koushuu Mountains. From the gate separating En and Kei, the city stretched out over the terraced slopes. A commanding view of the city opened up from the thoroughfare before the center gate. At the same time, the kingdom spread out from foot of the Koushuu Mountains.

Along with Shoukei, many others also stopped there on the street and gazed out at their surroundings and breathed sighs of resignation. Compared to En, the

view was a desolate one. No snow lay on the wintry countryside. The lack of snow cover only accentuated the lonely, barren view.

The border city was big. Nevertheless, the expected hustle and bustle were sadly lacking. Small buildings huddled together along narrow streets paved with compacted earth. It was warmer compared to cities in the north but all the windows were tightly shut. Windows glazed with glass were scarce as hen's teeth. It seemed a city stubbornly refusing to extend a welcome to anybody.

Wrecked buildings were everywhere, only the skeletons of their structures remaining behind. The jumble of motley shops lined the road, from the cramped buildings spilled a tide of smashed jars and jugs and furniture and household implements. Countless small huts, shutting out the wind with scrapped wood and old rags, perched along the outer loop road encompassing the city. Ragged, weary people crowded sullenly around the bonfires.

Kei was a country in turmoil. Here the precedent of a long-lived emperor did not exist. The most bitter difference between En and Kei was the long rule of a single emperor.

Large numbers of people flowed into the Kei side of the city, and the greatest portion of them were refugees.

"I thought it would have improved a bit more," muttered a despondent man, who seemed to speak for the crowds of people flowing down the street. "Yeah, I shouldn't have come back."

Shoukei heard the sighs from people in the group.

"Is it all this rotten, I wonder? It sure doesn't look good."

"I left the country after the empress died. I had no idea it had gotten this bad."

"Yeah, it's hard," Shoukei thought to herself as she walked along. *It's going to be hard fixing up this kingdom.*

The refugees were a headache to En, but so they were to Kei. People who had been to En couldn't help comparing it to Kei. Compared to her home kingdom of Hou, the condition of Kei wasn't so bad to make her despair. Yet the differences between En and Kei were as obvious as the nose on her face. Side by side with the prosperity and liveliness of En, the Kei side of the city looked a wreck.

The group of people continued on down the street together and entered a cheap inn. She finally found a three-story building with vacancies. Big rooms, but she had to share accommodations.

The refugees staying at the inn expressed a variety of sentiments—from those happy they were able to return to their home country, earnestly optimistic about the future, to those nursing the broken dream of moving back to a blessed, wealthy kingdom and living the easy life.

“You hear that about the empress?”

Shoukei overheard several people talking together in a corner of the guest quarters.

“An empress? Again?”

“If I’d known that, I would have stayed in En.”

“Empresses are no good. They don’t have what it takes. It’ll all go to hell in a handbasket soon enough.”

“The minute it starts heading down that road, we’re hightailing back it to En.”

“I’m telling you, the next time we leave, we’re never coming back.”

Yeah, it really was a mess. Shoukei sighed. For some reason, the Imperial Kei didn’t seem like a stranger to her. When she thought about what it must be like to be the empress, she had to sigh in sympathy.

And right now she’s probably in the palace thinking the same thing.

“I wonder if we just should head back now.”

“Never happen. There’s nothing left for us in En. No matter how you slice it, we weren’t born in En.”

“Yeah, but we can’t go back to where we was born neither.”

“Hopefully something’s left of our hometown.”

“Forget it.” One of the men leaned forward. “You know anything about ships leaving from Goto?”

“What’s that?”

"Warships headed to Tai. One of the governors in Wa Province been dispatching them, or so's I hear. Seems they're picking up refugees in Tai and bringing them here."

"News to me. You gotta be crazy, heading off to Tai now? Put a cork in it."

"Not, I'm not talking about that. Let's see, where was it . . . yeah, Shisui. The governor of Shisui, he sends out these boats 'cause of how sorry he feels for the refugees and all. If you get on board and make it to Shisui, he'll give you a plot of land and register you on the census."

"Shisui, Wa Province . . . that's right on the border of Ei Province."

"Hey, if they can take care of refugees like that, Shisui's got to be doing great, right? If we ask, they got to welcome us in, right?"

"Nonsense." A woman waved her hand dismissively. "It's all sweet talk. People pulling the wool over your eyes."

"It ain't. I heard the same from other people as well. Right?"

There was a lull in the conversation.

"They got you believing in tall tales, all right. That's all they are."

"That can't be true. C'mon, no one's heard of it before? Really?"

In response to his query, Shoukei raised her voice. "I have."

The tight little group suddenly opened up, its attention falling on her. The one man approached her. "It's true, isn't it? I knew it!"

"Well, um, I heard about it in Ryuu. I heard about it from a sailor who worked on ships that sailed from Ryuu to Tai. He said there were ships like that."

A flurry of conversation followed, all of them arguing at the same time about how well off Shisui must be, and how their hometown might not even exist anymore.

"So why don't we just go see for ourselves?"

"My village got destroyed when the river flooded its banks."

"I'd rather go back to where I was born."

They ended up split down the middle, between those who wanted to start for Shisui right away, and those who thought it all a pack of lies and argued that nothing good would come of it.

"Where'd you come from?" one of them asked Shoukei.

She tilted her head to one side. "I'm from Hou. You know, I'd like to get a homestead of my own except I'm not old enough." She could fib about her age but she wasn't sure about how to carry it off. "If Shisui really is that wealthy, I don't see any harm in finding out for myself." She nodded to herself as she spoke. "I've got to get a job somewhere and it might as well be Shisui as anywhere else."

The next day, Shoukei started her journey to Shisui. She'd gotten used to traveling by wagon in Ryuu so that was how she'd decided to proceed. Unlike Ryuu and En, there were many more people walking along the roads. It wasn't too cold to walk. The work of walking alone kept a traveler warm enough, aside from the fingers and the toes, to be tolerable.

The road headed south toward Meikaku, the capital city of Wa Province. The highway to Gyouten ran east to west through Meikaku and Shisui.

The devastation of the countryside was severe. Many of the buildings in the villages en route were destroyed. The wrecked fields lay fallow, the ashen forests were blighted and burned. With so little snow, nothing was hidden from view. Here and there, the countryside surrounding a hamlet where people lived were dotted with earthen mounds. So many people had died.

It made her shudder. The ravaged mountains and streams, the loss of life. This was what happened when the throne sat empty.

"Miss, where you from?" an old man sitting next to her in the wagon asked.

Shoukei tore her eyes away from the view out of the back of the wagon. Many wagons in Kei traveled with the back uncovered.

"Hou," she said.

"Is it true, the stories about the emperor of Hou dying?"

"Yes."

"Huh." The old man hugged the onjaku to his chest. "So Hou's gonna go through this as well."

Shoukei's eyes widened in response to this matter-of-fact statement. It was true. Many people would die. Victims would begrudge their assailants, the same way she hated Gekkei.

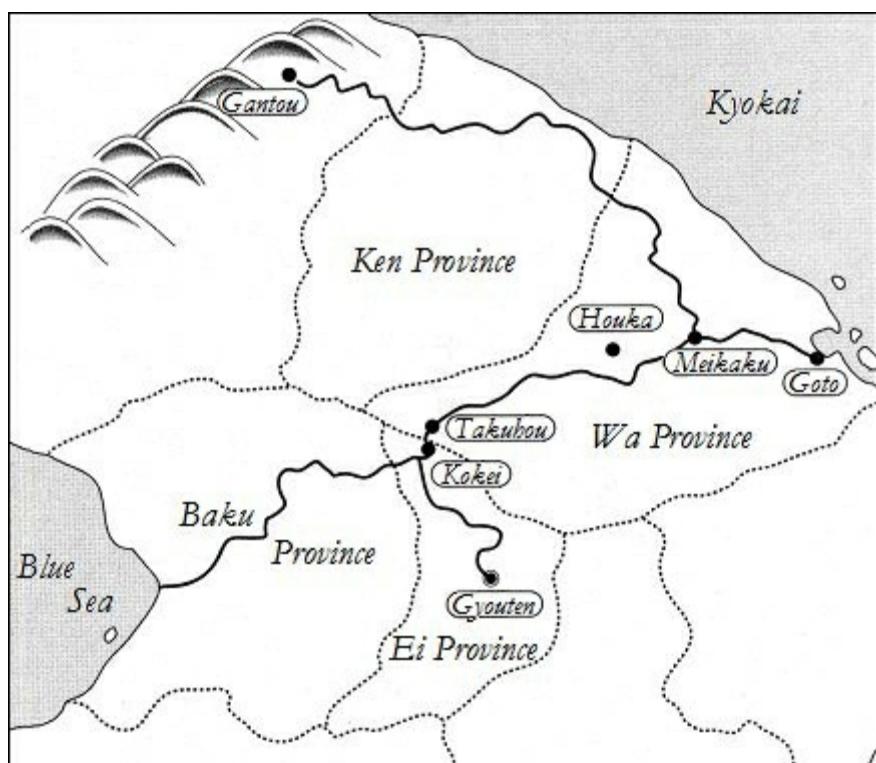
And so he should be hated, for bringing such destruction upon the kingdom. She said, "Kei is better off now, with a new empress on the throne."

The old man chuckled. "I suppose you could say it's getting better. But that's what we all thought the last time."

He didn't have anything more to say after that.

Chapter 48

[12-4] Wa Province was east of Ei Province, stretching from the eastern border of Ei to the Kyokai. Along with Keiki, Youko traveled toward Meikaku, situated in the eastern quarter of the province. A large highway reached straight across Kei from the Kyokai to the Blue Sea. A second major route ran southward from the Koushuu Mountains. The roads intersected at Meikaku.



"Meikaku is an important overland stop," Keiki said.

Using the shirei, the journey took two days. They landed not far from Meikaku and walked the rest of the way.

"This road is the lifeline to the northern quarter of the kingdom. The terminal city of Goto is the only real port that Kei has on the Kyokai. Salt and rice are shipped from the south, medicines from Shun, wool and barley from the north. All must be purchased with the surplus from agricultural harvest and supplied to the northern quarter to keep the people alive."

"The northern quarter is that poor?"

Keiki nodded. "It is a mountainous region with little arable land. Dry during the summer, with a long rainy season starting in the fall. The harvest depends on the weather, but there is no other industry they can turn to."

“Huh.”

“Especially now, with shipping traversing the Blue Sea from the south largely at a standstill, Goto has become even more critical. On top of that, there is only one port of entry between En and Kei along the Koushuu Mountains, hence the importance of Gantou to the overland routes and Goto to the sea routes. Cargo coming into Kei from either must necessarily use these roads and pass through Meikaku.”

“Could Wa Province be wealthy, despite being in the northern quarter?”

Keiki smiled sardonically. “It is said that highwaymen prowl the roads of Wa. In order to protect cargo shipments, Wa dispatched the provincial guard to build forts and protect the caravans. Because it is paid for with excise taxes, the cost of goods rises accordingly.”

“Makes sense.”

The unfortunate truth was that there was no way to avoid Wa Province when shipping anything from Gantou or Goto.

“Gahou certainly knows his business.”

Keiki scowled. “I think not. There are big cities bordering Meikaku to the north and east that warehouse cargo and house travelers. They’re called Hokkaku and Toukaku, and while part of Meikaku they are much bigger than Meikaku. Farmland was procured and leveled, tall walls constructed, and these cities were built from nothing just to house merchandise and people. The people who use those cities shoulder the entire burden. The people of Wa do the work. They’re worked like slaves.”

Youko said in exasperation, “Why should a man like Gahou be put in charge of province as important as Wa?”

Keiki lowered his gaze. The Late Empress Yo had given Wa Province to Gahou. Gahou presented her with a garden on the outskirts of Gyouten. It was a garden the size of a hamlet. Passing through the gates presented the eye with a scene of rustic beauty. A row of six homes, an old man who served as gamekeeper to the deer, a child to feed the pheasants.

Gahou gave Yo this beautiful little hamlet, in which the empress could live out

her dream of a quiet, uneventful existence. She visited it often, and in thanks granted Gahou whatever he wished. That was how Wa Province came into his possession.

The empress surely was happiest when chatting with the villagers, trimming the grass in the gardens that surrounded the hamlet, teaching the children embroidery in a house built for that purpose. Would things have turned out differently, Keiki wondered, if she hadn't been able to indulge herself so. Every time he pled with her to return to the palace and she wept and refused, her eventual fate drawing inexorably closer.

He should not have put her on the throne. But the divine oracles had directed him to her. No one else was possible.

"Keiki?"

A soft voice called out to him. Keiki quickly collected himself. His new lord peered up at him, her head tilted quizzically. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing," Keiki said, shaking his head. He raised his head and looked across the countryside. A mountain stream ran alongside the highway. Ahead of them was the soaring Ryou-un Mountain and the walls rising up at its base.

"That looks to be Meikaku."

Meikaku Mountain pierced the Sea of Clouds. The gently sloping hills gathered about the foot of the mountain. The city snaked along the valleys beneath the ridgelines formed by the hills.

"This is the capital?"

Youko stood at the gates of Meikaku and looked down the main boulevard, a broad avenue almost devoid of life. The imperial and provincial capitals had eleven gates. District and prefectoral capitals had twelve. In the case of the imperial and provincial capitals, the central north gate or Rat Gate, was left out. In its place, just north of the city was the Ryou-un and the imperial and provincial government offices.

Youko and Keiki entered Meikaku through the western or Rooster Gate. The main boulevard ran straight east seven hundred paces from the Rooster Gate to the municipal offices in the middle of the city. The street was a good hundred

paces wide. In every other city, small shops lined the street making it much narrower. The street itself would be thronged with people and wagons. But there wasn't a single shop in sight.

There was no evidence of the refugees camped out in the surrounding countryside. None of the impoverished and homeless people they had seen in every town and city they had passed along the way during the three days, traveling by means of Keiki's shirei. The place was lifeless. Not a store, not a roadside stall. No crowds coursing along the thoroughfares.

A number of the travelers who entered the gate with her looked over the wide street with equal surprise. Youko glanced to the right and left as she passed through the gate. A sullen man approached, walking through the gate with accustomed steps. Youko called out to him, "Excuse me."

The man stopped and turned his blank gaze to her.

"Something going on today?"

The man was carrying a heavy basket on his back. He cast a disinterested look at the street and then back to her and said with sleepy eyes, "Naw. Nothing."

"Yes, but it's almost nightfall."

"Nothing out of the ordinary here. If you're looking for an inn, better go to Hokkaku or Toukaku. For Hokkaku, go to the Boar Gate. For Toukaku, go to the Hare Gate."

He spoke curtly, and in a low voice. He swayed a bit, as if adjusted the load on his back, and then turned on his heels and without another word walked away.

It was not uncommon for cities to have a second or third much larger city appended to them. She had seen quite a few of them in En. The entire metropolis was often given a single name, but the appended cities were known to keep their original names as well.

"What do you think?" Youko asked under her breath.

Standing next to her, tying a bandana around his head, Keiki tilted his head and said, "Well. It is too quiet."

"Yeah. I could understand there being no people here, but no stores or shops

either?"

Surveying the shoulders of the avenue outside the gate as well, there was not even a pushcart to be seen. A few people here and there, the sound of the wheels of the occasional horse cart echoing in the empty air.

"Something happen?" asked the people who had just come through the gate.

Youko smirked unconsciously. "Yeah, I had the same question."

The other party was a group of three men. They looked across the wide boulevard, the confusion evident on their faces. "Is this Meikaku?"

"Supposedly."

"I've never seen a capital city this empty. You two from here?"

Youko shook her head. The men gave the street another puzzled examination. "No shops. No people."

"Something bad went on here?"

"If there'd been a disaster, they'd be flying a white flag."

When disaster befell a city, white flags were flown from the ramparts. With this forlorn sight in front of their eyes, travelers would know something had happened. But that didn't seem to be the case here.

They watched the men start guardedly down the street. Next to her, Keiki said, "I smell death."

"Keiki?"

An unpleasant expression briefly clouded his pale complexion. "This city is a swamp of human malice."

Youko spun around. "We're leaving."

"Your Highness?" he replied.

Youko glanced back over her shoulder. "There's a road through the countryside. The cities are to the north and east, right? There should be access points from the outside. I'm not chancing going through the city and stressing you out."

Part XIII

Chapter 49

[13-1] “We don’t have a name for ourselves,” Koshou said, drawing water from the well. Next to him, Suzu rinsed out the buckets and jugs. “We number no more than a thousand. Most of us are in Shisui Prefecture.”

“Oh.”

“If you need something in the city, search out a person wearing this ring. Ask him where he’s from. Guaranteed, he’ll acknowledge you with an *eshaku*.”

“An *eshaku*? ”

“Like this.” He had Suzu hold out her hands and clench her left hand—but not tightly—and then cover the left hand with the right. She then raised her hands together and bowed. This was how people of stature greeted each other. Properly performing the *eshaku*, though, required long sleeves. The jacket Suzu was wearing only came to her wrists.

“It feels funny.”

Koshou smiled. “What matters is that you confirm the person you’re looking for is wearing a ring without drawing attention to it. Ask where he’s from. If he says he from *Shikin* in San County, Baku Province, then he’s your man. If he asks your name, you say you’re *Otsu Etsu* of Rou Shou.”

“What’s that mean?” Suzu asked with a quizzical expression.

Koshou chuckled. “*Shikin* is an old place name. Hundreds of years before, during the reign of Emperor Tatsu, a wizard named Rou Shou showed up in *Shikin*. ”

“Was *Shikin* the location of his manor?”

“No. Rou Shou didn’t have a manor. He was a wizard who gained his powers through the exercise of his own will. So he can be called Rou Shou or Shou Rou. This class of wizard uses the prefix *Rou*, meaning an elder or old man. He’s also

called Count Shou."

"Oh, a self-made wizard who's an earl or count."

Wizards who had risen to the rank of count, and who had attained that rank by means of their own effort, also served at the Five Sacred Mountains. They were the *Senpaku*.

"He had been practicing his craft for the general public when Emperor Tatsu invited him to serve in the Imperial Palace. His full name is Otsu Etsu. Nobody really knows if he existed or not. He shows up in legends and stories a lot."

"Huh."

"If a stranger with a ring approaches you with these questions, you answer the same way."

"Oh, I see."

"If they're one of us, you can trust them, no matter what. It's guaranteed they'll help you. Our word is our bond. We take pride in it."

"All this in order to get rid of *him*?"

"Of course," Koshou nodded. "The countryside around Takuhou is crowded with graves. The bodies of the dead cover the land. Somebody has to take him down. Somebody has to bring him to justice."

Suzu stopped what she was doing. By *him* they meant the governor of Shisui Prefecture, Shoukou. She asked, "Why is someone like him allowed to get away with it?"

"It's said that there are people in high places who give him a pass."

"Like in Gyouten?" said Suzu, raising her head.

Koshou answered with a startled look. He put down the well bucket and sat down on the edge of the well. "Why do you say Gyouten?"

"A rumor I've heard to that effect. The most important person in Gyouten is protecting Shoukou."

"I see," Koushou muttered. "That certainly is being rumored about. It's said that none other than the empress is protecting Shoukou. But I'm not

convinced.”

“It’s not true?”

“I couldn’t say. The one giving a free rein to Shoukou is Gahou.”

“Gahou?”

“The marquis of Wa Province. Shoukou’s got the protection of the province lord. That’s why he has a free rein. The marquis is no less a beast than Shoukou. The only difference between them is, as villains go, Gahou is not as blind as Shoukou to appearances.”

“I see.”

“The Late Empress Yo made Gahou the marquis of Wa. She was not competent enough to see through him, so flattery won him what he wanted. Protests were lodged, appeals were made, arms were raised in resistance, but she continued to indulge him.”

“That’s awful.”

“Even after the empress ascended to the throne, he was left in power. There are those who don’t believe he enjoys the support of the empress, but it’s not hard to believe. It was thanks to her that the province lord of Baku was dismissed.”

“The province lord of Baku?”

Koshou stared up at the sky above the small courtyard. “The marquis of the province to the west of Ei Province. The marquis of Baku was greatly admired by his people. He’s rumored to have been a wise and knowledgeable ruler. This past summer, before the empress had claimed the throne, a pretender arose and cast the kingdom into turmoil. He resisted her to the very end.”

“And for that he was dismissed? While Gahou and Shoukou remain?”

Koshou nodded. “Many people have their doubts about the empress. None of us understand why the marquis was dismissed while Gahou is left where he is. On the other hand, the coronation was only recently. She may not be able to do anything about it.”

Suzu sloshed the wash water out of the pail. “Doesn’t seem to be much

difference between this empress and the last one.”

“Maybe so.” Koshou gave her a good long look. “What exactly did you have in mind for the Imperial Kei?”

Suzu averted her gaze. Koshou took a surprised breath. “You are one to act without thinking. Did you really have it in mind to go charging into Kinpa Palace? There’s no way you could have pulled that off.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t try.”

Koshou pushed himself off the edge of the well and leaned over next to her. “That kid died in a bad way.”

Suzu looked back at him, then looked at her hands.

“I hate to say it but there are unfortunate kids like that everywhere. They’re not rare in this kingdom. This is a kingdom still in chaos. There are tragedies all over the place.”

“Yeah. I know,” Suzu said with a sigh. “I’m a kaikyaku.”

“Yes,” Koshou acknowledged with his eyes.

“I was thrown into this world where I could never go home again, I didn’t understand what anybody said. I was truly pitiful.”

“Yeah.”

“But I wasn’t truly pitiful. Compared to Seishuu, I was lucky. I didn’t understand that and kept on feeling sorry for myself and insisted on bringing Seishuu all the way here.”

“You shouldn’t blame yourself like that.”

Suzu shook her head. “I was lucky. Oh, I’ve been in a tight spot or two, but a little patience and a backbone were all I needed. I never imagined someone like Shoukou causing so much suffering for so many people. I really can’t stand myself now.” She laughed. “It was really a temper tantrum. Instead of taking it out on myself, I tried taking it out on Shoukou. Like Sekki said, I really do hate myself. But,” she said, raising her head, “we can’t let Shoukou be, can we?”

“No, we can’t.”

"I don't know about the rest of the kingdom, but Shisui is an accursed place and the people here suffer because of it. I want to make it so nobody suffers like that anymore. I want to make it so nobody ever dies the way Seishuu died."

"I understand."

"The fact is, I don't trust myself. I don't trust what my own pain and bitterness are telling me to do. But if you and Sekki hate Shoukou enough to want him dead, then it is okay for me to hate him, too?"

"Yeah . . . sure." With a shrug, the big man crouched down next to the well and sighed, self-effacing smile coming to his lips. "To tell the truth, I don't get it myself."

"Eh?"

"If you can put something painful behind you, it's over. But being alive means there'll be no end to bad things happening. Still, worrying about every little thing gets you nowhere. Good things happen too. Forget the bad and you can enjoy the good. You gotta keep putting one foot ahead of the other."

Suzu nodded and Koshou continued. "Honestly, I don't understand government and politics, complicated stuff like that. Whether or not Shoukou is a decent governor, I'm not the one to ask. Same with Gahou, same with the marquis of Baku. Maybe Shoukou has some importance to the government. Maybe even a guy like that is useful to someone. But as for me, him being alive makes me tired."

"Makes you tired?"

"I'm a simple guy. When I hear about kids getting killed who did nothing wrong, I get mad. And getting mad makes you tired. It's hard to forget something that just rubs you the wrong way. Sekki's better at it than me. He went right from the county to the prefecture school and even got into the district academy. His elementary school principal gave him a recommendation. There was nothing stopping him from becoming a government official. I gotta think he's got a bright future ahead of him. But I really can't say that makes me happy. So he becomes a government official. Then what? If he gets into the government, is he gonna get used by Shoukou? Fall in with Gahou? I can't get excited about my little brother hanging around with people like that."

“Koshou . . .”

“Sekki doesn’t like it either. Even though he was interested, he quit. There are bad things you can’t forget even if you want to. Things you can’t be happy about even if you want to. Being that way wears me out. I hate it. Being alive is not enough. You want to feel good about life, right? You want to believe, hey, I’m glad I was born. I’m happy to be there. But as long as there are people like Shoukou around, I can’t feel that way. That’s why I gotta do something about it.”

Suzu took a breath and let it out. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. If I thought I could storm the prefecture palace and kill Shoukou and put my mind at ease, I’d do it. But it wouldn’t put my mind at ease. In the first place, I never could do it. When it comes to dealing with Shoukou, the only way I can think of is to approach him in numbers and force him from office. And if he said, over my dead body, well, we’d have to oblige him. Anything I came up with on my own would be a waste. I haven’t got enough self-discipline.”

“Really.”

“I’ve got a temper like a kid. Sekki’s the one to think things through.”

Suzu laughed. “I perfectly understand where you’re coming from.”

“Yeah?” the big man smiled.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Well, we need to borrow your sansui. We’re collecting weapons. We can’t go up against Shoukou and his bodyguards with shovels and hoes.”

“So you need to transport some cargo?”

“Rou Hansei, a long-time friend of mine, is getting a shipment ready for us. Would it be okay for you to take your sansui there and back?”

Suzu nodded firmly. “Sure. No problem.”

Chapter 50

[13-2] “This is Meikaku.”

The driver dropped Shoukei off at the gates to the city. She looked at the ramparts in surprise. The haphazard state of the walls alone was a shock.

“What a strange city,” she observed as she paid the driver.

He laughed scornfully. “That’s what everybody says.”

“I thought city walls were supposed to run in straight lines.”

“Yeah,” the young man said, gazing up at the walls.

The walls of a city as big as a provincial capital were normally wide enough to post sentries along the top. Merlons in the battlements provided cover for archers posted behind the parapets. Here and there structures called bastions jutted out from the walls. Bastions were built in all shapes and sizes, but for no particular reason they were usually rectangular and of a fixed height.

Here at Meikaku, though, such regularity was hard to find. The wall ran along for a while at an impressive height and then suddenly dipped down so low the wall opposite became visible. Some bastions were joined together by wall walks hardly wide enough to walk over. These structural undulations continued on like the untutored scribblings of a child.

Shoukei looked over her shoulder at the young driver. He again laughed sarcastically. “The only inns are in Hokkaku or Toukaku. Originally, the inns were in a bunch of warehouses outside the Boar Gate. They built a big wall around them and every year it gets bigger. Kind of a mess, huh? It’s even worse inside because the old walls were left in place. Try not to get lost.”

“Thanks,” Shoukei said.

The driver regarded the city walls with a nonplused expression and returned to the horse cart. Shoukei peered at the main gate. A big tunnel was carved into the wall. The gates were adorned with nothing more than a plain-looking pair of doors. The plate above the gate simply read, “Meikaku.”

Like the driver had said, a crude rock pile of a wall obstructed the way. At the base of the wall, canvas tarps were stretched over jumbles of wooden planks to form a tent city crammed with huts and sheds barely big enough to lie down in. The overflowing tide of people, their faces glum and ragged, flowed right up to the gates. The refugees had built themselves a village on the vacant land. It looked like one strong gust of wind would sweep it all away.

When she stepped inside the city itself, its decrepit condition became even more apparent. She had to wonder how many laborers had been pressed into hard service building these pointless, meandering walls. Some were so squat and narrow that they appeared to have been dumped there as refuse. And the others were amazingly high and thick.

The streets zigzagged through the chaotic city, ending in blind alleys. Shoukei had never seen such a confusing place. Buildings built without any rhyme or reason. Horse carts haphazardly blocking the flow of traffic. Milling crowds of refugees only throwing everything into complete chaos.

"What is with this city?" Shouko said under her breath.

She noticed people casting apprehensive glances in one particular direction. A number of them passed by her with tight faces, heading down a road that apparently ran to the city center. One man walked forward with a hard expression on his face. Another man turned back against the flow of people, looking fearfully over his shoulder as he headed in the opposite direction at a brisk clip.

What is going on? she asked herself.

Shoukei headed in the same direction, craning her neck to see. She turned a corner. The people moving in that direction had unexpectedly multiplied. Before long, the surging tide of humanity made retreat impossible.

"You'd better stop."

The sudden sound of someone's voice calling out to her made Shoukei turn back, even as the human wave bore her along. From within the throngs, an old man turned to her and held up his hand.

"You'd better not go. You're gonna see something you don't want to."

"What?" she wanted to ask, searching her surroundings, but the river of people bore her along with them. Before she knew it, she had come to the main boulevard of the city.

It was the center of the city. More than a boulevard, it approximated a town square. The streets abruptly opened up into a plaza surrounded by crumbling walls. Soldiers were posted around its circumference. In the center were a number of people tied together.

The thing she didn't want to see.

The people paraded to the center of the plaza were secured with ropes around their waists. Eyeing the brawny men securing the rope, Shoukei could tell that something was about to happen. The thick wooden posts arranged on the ground only reaffirmed this conviction.

A crucifixion. Those people were going to be nailed to those stakes. *There are places other than Hou where this punishment is exacted?*

Rakushun had told her that there was no kingdom without a death penalty. But decapitation was the usual method. A particularly severe sentence might entail planting the severed head on a pike. More cruel methods of execution were no longer carried out anywhere else, or so the very knowledgeable hanjuu had told her.

"You don't want to see this."

Somebody pulled on her coat. When she turned around, it was a small, middle-aged man with a tired look on his face. "This isn't the place for a girl like you. You should leave."

"Why are they doing this?"

The man shook his head. "The worse things you can do in Wa Province is fail to pay your taxes or run away from a labor gang. It was one or the other for most of them there."

"But . . . crucifixion . . ."

"I know, it's news to most travelers. Nobody wants to spread bad news, that's why. So they leave Wa Province hearing no evil, seeing no evil. Come here and

it's another story."

"But this . . ."

Shoukei's voice was drowned out by a scream, intermingled with the sound of a stone mallet striking a nail. Without thinking, she turned and saw the writhing form of a man, one hand pinned to a wooden post.

"Stop . . ."

Again, the heavy sound. Shoukei reflexively recoiled and shut her eyes. *It used to happen all the time in Hou. None other than her own father had mercilessly sent so many people to the gallows.*

In an instant, the memory and fear of almost being drawn and quartered shot through her thoughts. The vengeful voices and vitriolic cries of the townspeople as they dragged her into the square in front of the Rishi. The bitterness in Gobo's face as she raised the cane to flog her.

Another scream. Moans arose from the crowds surrounding the square. The rising clamor thankfully extinguished the sound of the falling mallet. Unable to bear it further, Shoukei took a step back. Her heel struck a stone and she almost lost her balance.

A stone.

A stone the size of her fist. Similar stones were strewn across the plaza, probably from the crumbling walls.

The screams echoed against the walls.

Gobo's son had been executed for throwing a stone like this. How could taxes or forced labor matter so much? Such crimes were hardly commensurate with the extremities of pain that could reduce a big man to such wailing.

"Stop!"

Shoukei grabbed the stone at her feet. Why wasn't anybody stopping this? What kind of people were these? Before her mind could sort it out, her arm had acted. She threw the stone over the wall of people. It flew with no great force, striking one of the soldiers pushing back the crowds. The stone fell to the black earth and rolled several paces.

The crowd fell deathly silent.

"Who threw that!" bellowed a commanding voice.

Shoukei stepped back from where she had been standing.

"Whoever threw that stone, present yourself!

The eyes of the people next to her fell on her. The distress showed in their faces, as to whether or not to finger her as the assailant.

"Drag her out here!"

Responding to the command, the wall of people in front of her broke apart. As Shoukei stepped back again, somebody grabbed her wrist. Shoukei jerked her arm like a whip and broke free. She spun on her heels and clawed her way through the throngs. Once again, that same somebody grabbed her again, hard, yanking her half off her feet.

"This way."

Shoukei fell to her knees. She raised her eyes. It was a girl her same age. A moment later her eyes fell upon the long overcoat the girl was wearing and she couldn't help thinking it was a young man. But no.

"This way. Quickly."

The girl spoke forcefully. There was no time to think. She dragged Shoukei along, forcing her way through the crowds. After too many steps to count, crawling most of the time, she was again pulled to her feet. Plowing people out of the way, they finally cut through and saw daylight.

"Where are you! Show yourself!"

Glancing briefly in the direction of the angry voices behind them, the two of them bolted from the square.

Escaping the wave of humanity, Shoukei let herself be dragged along as she ran. They barreled through the countless maze-like streets, arriving at the outskirts of the city near the ramparts. Through a fissure in the wall, they tumbled out of the city.

"I leapt before I looked," Shoukei gasped. The girl at last let go of her arm.

Shoukei took a good look at her, vivid eyes set against her scarlet hair. She was definitely a she. Shoukei said, “Thank you.”

Behind them in the city, the angry voices rang out.

“I understand the feeling,” the girl said. “I tend to act before I think too.”

“It’s like I couldn’t stop myself.”

Tagging along behind the girl, Shoukei peered back over her shoulder. Hard as it was for her to believe, she wondered if she’d caused any unnecessary grief to the people around her. She wondered how the prisoners had fared. The girl looked at her, as if reading her mind. “I’m okay,” Shoukei said in strangely confident voice and nodding for no particular reason.

At the same time, some distance off to the side, came a shrill shout. “There she is!”

Ten or more soldiers turned the far corner of the ramparts. Shoukei froze. The girl planted herself in front of her. “Go,” she said. “Get out of here.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, flashing a bold smile. She put her right hand to her waist and deftly drew out a sword.

Shoukei goggled at her. She didn’t have time to ask if she knew how to use it. The girl pushed her on her way. She hesitated and again looked back at the girl, who again told her forcefully to go.

“You’ll be okay?”

“Don’t sweat it.”

Shoukei nodded. She’d be out in the open, cutting across the open countryside. So instead she followed along the weaving, undulating ramparts and soon disappeared from sight.

As she turned the last corner, she looked back and saw the red-haired girl, sword in hand, practically flying about the field. She was acting as a decoy. Shoukei spotted a soldier holding up his arm and pointing towards the girl. Most of soldiers went charging into the field.

Thank you, she said in her heart, and started running in earnest, looking for a place to crawl under. The wall here was too high to climb over. Maybe there was a hole in the wall somewhere.

She turned another corner when a voice above her said, “Hey!”

Thinking it was one of her pursuers, she ducked down. But then glancing up, she saw a man atop the parapets extending his hand down to her. Here the wall was low enough for him to reach her.

“Here, grab my hand.”

Shoukei hesitated for a second, glanced behind her. She could hear the sound of footsteps approaching the corner of the wall she had just come around.

“Hurry!”

Shoukei grabbed the hand. The man was twenty-five or six. His strength belied his small size. He pulled Shoukei to the top of the wall with remarkable speed.

Three soldiers appeared from the corner of the ramparts. “Halt!” they called out.

She swallowed the pain from her practically dislocated shoulder, kicked her toes against the stone wall and crawled up to the wall walk. A soldier’s hand reached for her foot and missed, clawing at her ankle. Her rescuer’s hand still holding hers, she collapsed on the walkway.

She fell to her hands and knees, gasping for breath. Behind her, a soldier climbed onto the wall walk. The man almost casually delivered a kick that sent the soldier sprawling. The soldier roared with anger. The next soldier appeared, holding a spear over his head.

“Run!”

The man grabbed the business end of the spear as it was thrust toward him. A tug of war ensued, ending several seconds later with the soldier losing the battle and just as quickly finding the grip of the spear planted in his throat.

“Jump!” was the man’s next command, as he whirled the spear like a knife through the air and positioned himself. The expression on his face was distant and dispassionate.

Shoukei nodded. It was a good twenty feet from the edge of the parapets to the road below. Sandwiched between the walls was an alleyway strewn with garbage. Hearing the yells and screams of the soldiers, Shoukei jumped, or rather, slid herself off the edge and down the wall. The shock of impact shot up through her legs. She collapsed on the ground.

She sat up, breathing hard. Above her, the man had seized a soldier by the collar and flung him off the far side of the wall. He threw the spear in the opposite direction, spun around and jumped down next to her.

"You okay?"

Shoukei nodded despite herself. He grinned somewhat mischievously and peered up at the wall. "The other girl made a clean getaway. Is she a friend of yours?"

Shoukei shook her head. Her ragged breaths tore at her throat. She couldn't speak. The alleyway was empty, but at least she heard no one else approaching.

"Can you move?" the man asked.

Shoukei again shook her head. In a past few minutes, she had used up a day's worth of energy. She didn't think she could move another inch.

"That so?" he said with a generous smile. He turned around and crouched down. "Climb on." Shoukei sat there, confused. "C'mon," he said, "hurry it up."

Shoukei obediently clung to his back and the man stood up without faltering in the slightest. "For the time being, pretend you're asleep. I'll take you somewhere where we can rest."

Chapter 51

[13-3] A shadow approached the woods. "Your Highness," said Keiki, recognizing her in the cold and desolate twilight.

"Sorry about that," said Youko.

"What happened? The word was, you would be leaving the city sooner than later." Keiki pushed through the undergrowth as they climbed the slope. He abruptly stopped and grimaced. "You have a bad scent about you. I am not referring to you, personally."

"You can smell that? Sorry. I had Hankyo bear the victims away from the square."

Keiki sighed. Hankyo had come to the inn, said that he was to leave the city, and then guided him here. Keiki shrank back from the smell of blood. "So a youma appears in the city of Hokkaku."

He glanced at her and found that she was scowling at him. A wry smile came to her face. "I was helping hurt people. Don't give me that look."

"Then I shall come to my conclusions after being informed of the details."

Youko sat down and again smiled a deeply ironic smile.

They'd taken an inn in Hokkaku and stayed there for three days. There, too, Keiki noted the smell of death. With no other town nearby, they had to stay in Hokkaku. Youko strolled around the strange city. The hard toil of the citizenry built these wall, and all to suit the selfish needs of Gahou, province lord of Wa Province.

The better way would be to build the walls as big as possible, at the reach of the city limits, and then build the city small and let it grow over the years. Built it right and the people will come for protection from robbers and highwaymen. But Gahou built no bigger than he had to at any one time, and added the rest to the money he collected in tolls.

The city was densely populated, Gahou having shut most of the population out

of Meikaku. The taxes were so steep in Meikaku that only the rich and mighty could afford to live there. People and commerce had been chased out, enlarging Hokkaku and Toukaku to an alarming degree. With travelers and their belongings, the streams of refugees, the cities were cramped. And all because of Gahou and his lousy walls. The peasants who lived in the countryside around Meikaku didn't even have time to farm.

"That's why at least four of them were being executed. They fled the forced labor gangs to get the crops in. They're the ones I had Hankyo help."

"Oh," Keiki muttered.

Youko laughed to herself. "A girl threw a stone at the executioner. I helped her escape but the soldiers came after us. I guess my hair kind of stands out, huh? Getting back to Hokkaku looked difficult so I had you brought here. Sorry for the trouble."

Keiki let out a breath. "I do wish Your Highness would act with more prudence."

"My bad." Youko propped her elbows on her knees. From the slope of the hill, Meikaku was visible in the distance. "I didn't know people in Kei were executed by crucifixion."

"Nonsense."

"They're crucified in Wa Province."

Keiki looked at her, speechless.

"There are lots of things like that going on in this kingdom that you and I know nothing about."

Like a tax of thirty percent even in the Dutchy of Yellow, inhuman methods of punishment, corrupt officials like Gahou and Shoukou. Two months after ascending to the throne, the wizards of the earth had presented themselves at court. Gahou had surely been among them, and Shoukou as well.

"They all fell at my feet and kowtowed. But that only served to hide their scorn. *What a stupid empress*, they must have all thought."

"Your Highness."

“I need civil servants I can trust.”

Right now, in truth, she needed allies more. It hadn’t occurred to her when they were toppling the pretender. That’s because she had En by her side—the personal support of the Imperial En and six divisions of the En Imperial Army, commanded by impeccably disciplined staff officers and generals. Youko didn’t have to order anybody around. After rescuing Keiki from the clutches of the pretender, the ministers and province lords who had conspired with her one by one were brought into line. It was clear to her now that they had fallen before the authority of the throne and the might of En.

“What kind of person is Enho?”

“Enho?” Keiki answered, with a puzzled expression. “He’s a man who knows much about the way things work. He has taught a great many people.”

“Maybe I should invite him to the Imperial Court.”

Keiki said neither aye nor nay to that proposition. “When it comes to rousing the bureaucracy to action, rather than simply following their lead, Your Highness must make her own decisions. That is the first priority.”

“That I intend to do.”

Keiki sighed. “There are those at court who battle for power. In order to drag down an opposing faction, they will fabricate crimes and make accusations.”

Youko suddenly raised her head. “Who are we talking about?”

Keiki didn’t answer.

“What are you hiding?”

“Nothing. If Your Highness cannot confirm it for herself, she is unlikely to believe it. That is all I have to say about the matter. I only ask that you think it over.”

“You mean, Koukan?” The previous marquis of Baku Province. She’d dismissed him, though Keiki had stubbornly remained opposed.

Keiki raised his eyebrows. “I was not referring to anyone in particular. If Koukan is the first name that springs to mind, then perhaps his fate is weighing on Your Highness’s mind.”

Youko took a soft breath. "Well, that's something I wouldn't expect a kirin like you to say."

"It is the stubbornness of my lord that drives me to such things."

Youko got to her feet, grinning. "We'd better hurry or the gates are going to close. Let's go."

"Where to?"

Youko brushed off the dead grass and glanced again toward Meikaku. "I understand conditions in Meikaku. I like to go back to Kokei by means of Takuhou. You don't want to be away from Gyouten much longer, do you?"

Keiki nodded, looking up at her with a concerned expression. "And Your Highness?"

"Yeah, I know. I'll be back as soon as possible. But the one thing I have learned living in the real world is that I don't understand it at all."

"Empress."

Youko smiled at the scowling Keiki. "I'll return after I've learned everything inside and out. I can't believe I'm saying this myself, but I don't know when I'll return to Gyouten. That's how much I've figured out I didn't know."

"Indeed," said Keiki.

"I'm pretty sure I'll know for myself when enough is enough. I don't regret it. Coming down to the real world to live like this was absolutely necessary."

"Yes."

"So please wait until I've come to a conclusion. I don't think it will take that long."

Keiki didn't answer, but only bowed deeply.

Part XIV

Chapter 52

[14-1] Shoukei's rescuer came into the room. "How are you feeling?"

She smiled stiffly. "Nothing worse than a sprain. Thank you."

The man had carried her to a dilapidated house in Hokkaku. The first thing she'd noticed when they arrived was that she couldn't walk. She'd twisted her ankle either when she was scrambling up to the parapets or jumping down into the alleyway. She'd already observed it swelling up a bit.

Shoukei sat down with her leg propped up on a couch. The man pulled out a chair. "You're a brave young girl, but caution is the better part of valor. The girl who ran off into the countryside, do you know who she was?"

"I don't. She helped me get away and then disappeared."

The man said absently to himself, "Her actions struck me as something more than ordinary kindness. That was more an extraordinary display of resolve."

Shoukei leaned forward. "I could say the same about you."

The man smiled broadly, a smile that bespoke the character of a good-natured individual. "Call me Kantai. I've settled here in Hokkaku. I'm a mercenary of sorts."

"A mercenary? You?" His laid-back attitude didn't match the merciless image of a soldier.

"I've got a good arm for it. You run into a lot of highwaymen around here. So I get hired to protect people and their stuff. You don't really need to be all that strong. There simply aren't that many men who really know how to handle a sword."

"That's why you came to my rescue?"

Kantai gently smiled. "I know the feeling, wanting to clobber somebody with a rock like that."

“Oh.” Shoukei felt the tension ease out of her shoulders. “I’m Shoukei.”

“Shoukei-san. Did you have a place to stay tonight? The gates have closed already.”

Shoukei shook her head.

“You can stay here if you’d like. I’m renting the place with a couple of my mercenary friends. They’re an ill-bred lot but they’re not bad blokes.”

“Thank you, though I hate to impose.”

Kantai laughed. “Forget about it. After having to look at their sorry faces all day, a pretty girl like you is a breath of fresh air. Anyway, you’d have a tough time trying to find an inn after this.”

Shoukei nodded. There was still the possibility that people were searching for her. “What about yourself? I’d think they’d remember your face as well.”

This truly did bring a worried look to the man’s face. “That’s for damn sure. I’m going to have to lay off work for a while. Well, at any rate, food’s not an issue so I’m not too concerned.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry about. It was my decision to rescue you, after all. I’ve got my own thoughts about the way they do things around here.” Shoukei leaned closer and looked at him. Kantai smiled a bit awkwardly. “When you take seventy percent in taxes, not everybody’s going to be able to pay.”

“Seventy percent.”

“In Wa Province, seventy percent is the standard. In fact, the governor of Shisui is the only beast who collects seventy percent. So you’re talking fifty to sixty percent on the outside. But nobody can live under that kind of tax burden. In Wa, everybody lives the life of a refugee.”

“That’s awful.”

The tax rate was normally ten percent. At the very worse, additional levies could increase it to thirty percent. At seventy percent, it’s tough getting enough to eat, let alone live any kind of life.

"And if you don't pay, you end up like they did. On top of the taxes are the heavy demands placed on the work gangs, building walls, roads, bridges. Those walls are what you get when you throw people off their land and press them into hard labor."

"Why do they put up with it?"

"Because nobody wants to be crucified."

"Yeah."

Kantai patted Shoukei on the shoulder. "Until things calm down, you can rest here. Take your time." He smiled a bit bashfully. "But before you go, I could use a little help around the kitchen."

"Understood. Thanks for everything."

The house was about the same size as a rike. As private residences went, it was pretty big. The courtyard was surrounded by four halls, with the main gate in the southeast corner. Kantai seemed to be the landlord. He lived in the main wing, and as his guest, she was given the use of a room across the parlor from his room. Her room didn't have so much as a bed, but a divan instead.

Twenty men who looked a lot like soldiers were camped out in three of the rooms surrounding the courtyard. There were maybe two or three women, and they were all quite striking.

The next day, Shoukei found that she could at least walk, so she first decided to check out the kitchen instead of going to an inn. Even the pots on the stove had collected dust. The kitchen obviously had not been used in ages.

"Amazing," she said to herself.

"What is?" Kantai asked.

Shoukei literally jumped. "You surprised me."

"Sorry. How are you doing? Can you walk?"

"It doesn't hurt that much. Does anybody actually use this kitchen?"

Kantai smiled. "Most everybody here eats out. To tell the truth, I'd be happy just to be able to brew a cup of tea. But you can see the state things are in."

"Well, then let's get to the point where we can brew a cup of tea."

"Anything I can do to help?"

She looked up at him and was about to say it'd probably be easier for her to do it by herself, when he smiled sheepishly. "Naw. I know I'd better stick to the cleaning up. I'm all thumbs when it comes to stuff like this."

"You don't say. So, I take it you were brought up in nice digs."

Men and women became independent at the age of twenty, and were at least capable of doing what they observed going on around them. Those who could not were betraying their reliance on servants, of being brought up in luxurious surroundings, of having somebody to watch over them.

"Yeah, something like that."

"Well, I'll wash the pots. You run the water."

"That I shall do."

His overly formal answer struck her as a bit odd. The two of them carried the assortment of pots outside, to the rear of the kitchen. There was a bucket next to the well. The dipper in the bucket suggested that whenever anybody wanted a drink they just came out here and helped themselves.

"It really is every man for himself here."

"They're not the type who give such matters a second thought."

"When was the last time this bucket was cleaned? Unbelievable."

"You think so?"

"No matter. Are you a citizen of Kei, Kantai?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I was born in Hou."

"So you've come a long way to end up here."

Shoukei filled the bucket to overflowing. She washed her hands and smiled. "Yes, I did. I've come a long way. I never thought I'd ever end up in a kingdom where it didn't snow in the winter."

"Huh," said Kantai, as he lowered the bucket into the well.

"I didn't think there were any other kingdoms besides Hou that did something as cruel as crucifixion."

"Yeah," said Kantai, hauling up the bucket. "But Wa Province is unique. The province lord doesn't bother enforcing the rule of law."

"That's not true of all of Kei, is it?"

"Well, I don't know about all of Kei. I suspect only Gahou could make such a mess of things as this."

"Gahou? The marquis of Wa?"

"Yes. Two beasts rule in Wa. The province lord, Gahou, and the governor of Shisui Prefecture, Shoukou."

"Shisui Prefecture. I was thinking of going there."

"Why?"

He asked with such doubtful expression that Shoukei shrugged her shoulders when she said, "If you go to Shisui, you'll get land and registered on the census. They're bringing in refugees from Tai. You don't know about that?"

Kantai shook his head. "I don't. It's the first I've heard of it. I do see wagons carrying people passing through Meikaku, headed for Shisui."

"You know, that's probably why. When I get to Shisui, I figure there will at least be a job waiting for me."

"I'd stop thinking things like that, if I was you."

"Why?"

"I told you. Beasts prowl the land in Wa, and Shoukou leads the pack."

"But he'd at least want to help the refugees—"

"Shoukou isn't the kind of person who would ever help anybody. If you go there, I guarantee that you'll regret it."

"You're sure?"

A look of firm resolution came to his face. "The reason they're bringing people

to Shisui is because they're losing people. There's only so much land. No matter how wealthy, a prefecture can't keep bringing in refugees. The only reason they can is because the people who came before them are dead."

"Oh." Shoukei bit her lip. "So that's what it's about." She'd walked into this one with her eyes wide open, and had blindly thrown encouraging words around as well. If any of those she'd met before ended up going to Shisui, she'd have to apologize to them.

"I wonder what the Imperial Kei is doing?" Why does she leave such monsters in positions of power? Wasn't Kei supposed to be entering a new era?

"Our empress is no good," Kantai sighed.

Shoukei gave him a hard look. "No good?"

"They say the ministers at the Imperial Court lead her around by the nose. That's what happened to our last empress. She didn't care what happened to the kingdom. So she didn't care who governed us."

"Then why doesn't anybody tell that to the empress?"

"Tell the empress?" Kantai said, his eyes wide with surprise.

"If you're right, then she's got to be told the truth! Otherwise, they'll turn her into a puppet. Somebody's got to make her see the light!"

"You are—"

"If the Imperial Kei doesn't know what state the kingdom is in, it's going to come back to hurt her. Ignorance will be no excuse. Her own weakness won't be an excuse. Somebody has to tell her!"

So she wouldn't meet the same fate as herself. So she wouldn't meet the same fate as her father.

Kantai blinked. "Aren't you from Hou?"

Shoukei came back to her senses and reddened a bit. "Yes . . . but . . . it's like the Imperial Kei isn't a stranger to me. I heard she was the same age as me." She looked down. "Somebody has to tell her! If she doesn't find out, who knows what will happen to the throne?"

"How would you go about telling her? She lives in the heart of Kinpa Palace in Gyouten."

"Indeed."

"Rather, spark a flame here in Wa Province and she's bound to notice."

Shoukei raised her head and looked carefully into Kantai's gentle and smiling face.

"Light fires throughout all the provinces," he continued, "and she'll notice the embers burning at her feet. Don't you think?"

"I don't know."

This man had saved her life. He'd fought the soldiers chasing her and had given her shelter. Now he was a marked man as well. Why would he go so far? Because he'd been on the run from the beginning. Or he believed he was being pursued. At any rate, this man was preparing to raise the flag of rebellion against the province lord of Wa.

"I don't know, but I do know that something must be done. The state of things here cannot go on. Somehow or other, we've got to make the Imperial Kei aware of conditions here."

Kantai laughed without a touch of cynicism or reproach. "I think so, too. Well, let's straighten things up here. Now, you don't have anyplace to go, right? So why not stick around a while longer?"

Chapter 53

[14-2] Suzu helped out doing odd jobs around the inn. On occasion, she transported goods on her sansui and delivered messages back and forth.

The sansui disliked being ridden by anybody else but her. Koshou tried and nearly got walloped by a pair of hind legs capable of vaulting the walls of the city. Breaking a you-beast demanded the guts to go toe-to-toe (or hoof) with one, and fully training a pegasus required at least a decade. Its pride must be marshaled first. And only that tamed part of a pegasus would demonstrate a significant diminution of its assertiveness.

"When you get a bit better at mastering this beast . . ." said Koshou, gazing wistfully at the sansui.

"Me?" Gathering greens from the garden, Suzu stopped and looked over her shoulder at Koshou, who was sitting at the side of the well.

"A pegasus that's been really well trained will follow the orders its master gives it. The sooner you can become that kind of master, the sooner it will do what you tell it. Like let someone else ride it."

"Well, I'll see. It takes time."

"Sure does. When you've got a pegasus, riding a horse pales in comparison."

"Would you like a pegasus too, Koshou?"

"Not that I could ever afford one. Talk is cheaper. Even if I became a soldier."

"Don't soldiers get pegasi?"

"Only if you rise high in the ranks. And that depends on luck, but more on having the kind of connections that I don't have."

"Why not?"

"To get promoted, sure, you need a good sword arm, but you have to go to secondary school too. The commanders of the Imperial Army graduated from college, don't you know. On top of that, you've got to get commendations. Right now, the only way to get commendations is by working for people like Shoukou,

and that'd mean beating the crap out of farmers. Not the kind of soldiering I care to do."

"I see."

"But it'd be nice if I could follow through on something like that."

"How so?"

Koshou tore his eyes away from the sansui and laughed bitterly. "When you're a soldier you don't need to go to school, and it doesn't matter where you came from. If I could become a soldier somewhere, I could send Sekki away from Wa Province. He's got a good head on his shoulders. I want to do what I can to make sure he succeeds in life. I want to take him away from here, but until he turns twenty, I got to find work somewhere. Even if I'm looking for a wife, he's coming along, too."

Koshou and Sekki didn't have parents. They'd been in the care of the orphanage until Koshou turned twenty. When he got his independence, Koshou took custody of Sekki. Unfortunately, Koshou had been born in Takuhou and there was a surplus of land in Takuhou. Not because the amount of land was growing but because the population was shrinking due to the constant turmoil. Many farmers abandoned the land. The unluckier ones stayed and died.

Sekki was registered on the Takuhou census as well, so it was pretty much assured that when he turned twenty, he would get a partition in Takuhou. Even if he wanted to sell out and buy a shop in the city, land elsewhere was more valuable. Those landowners would have the upper hand when it came to making advantageous deals for themselves.

"If he hung in there and attended a local secondary school, it'd have to be a school in Wa. If Sekki demonstrated promise, he could go to university or at least the provincial academy and become a civil servant. But he'd still be stuck in Wa. Even if I found myself a wife and transferred my partition, Sekki couldn't come with me. That's how things stand now. To do right by Sekki, I'd have to become a soldier in another province, and Sekki would have to find a wife there as well . . ."

With that, Koshou clapped his hands. "Well, Suzu, how are things going?"

"Oh, stop it." Suzu playfully hit Koshou with the basket she was gathering the greens with. "That kind of thinking isn't like you at all. Wouldn't it be better to make Wa Province a nice place to live by the time Sekki turns twenty?"

Koshou grinned. "That's for sure."

Sekki piped up, "Rather than what worries others, what about what worries me?"

At the sound of his voice, Suzu and Koshou started and turned to the main wing of the inn.

"For example, even if we went to another province, I wouldn't stop worrying about my big brother. Being short tempered and liable to fly off at the handle and all."

Sekki ignored the glare Koshou directed at him and smiled at Suzu. "It's just about lunchtime."

Since most of the guests staying at the inn had some reason for being there, the lion's share of the tavern's income was earned at mealtimes. The old man who stood guard in the kitchen was not without talent. He kept the place neat and trim. As a consequence, it had gained some small fame in this forlorn corner of the city. The clientele, though, was anything but "high class."

Because alcohol was served, bar fights were the norm. If Koshou wasn't there, things tended to get out of control. "Business has really picked up, thanks to you, Suzu," Sekki laughed as they prepared the noonday meal.

"Don't be silly."

"A girl is a strange sight around here. Many have returned but women are still scarce in Kei. It's because the last empress had them all expelled."

"Oh."

"And because they were glad to get away from a dump like this. They're not eager to return. Those who know a craft or have some sort of ability aren't coming back. It's going to take some time."

After lunch, the only hangers-on were the same men who always hung out in the tavern. There wasn't a woman in sight. Not a one. It was very odd.

And then *she* came into the tavern.

Suzu was wiping down the tables and stopped what she was doing. The girl wore a shabby-looking overcoat that made her look like a boy. But having met her before, Suzu knew at once she was a girl.

“It’s you . . .”

And that unforgettable crimson hair.

The girl’s gaze fell upon her and her eyes widened with recognition. “You must be Suzu.”

“Yes,” Suzu nodded. “Thank you, for before.”

The girl had tended to Seishuu when he was run over and killed. Since then, Suzu hadn’t had the chance to express her gratitude.

“No need to thank me,” the girl said, shaking her head.

Suzu pulled out a chair for her. “Please, have a seat. Do you want something to eat? I’ll bring some tea.”

Suzu hurried into the kitchen. When she rushed in, Sekki came to his feet. “Suzu, do you know her?”

“I don’t really know her. We met once before.”

“Oh,” said Sekki, a dark expression briefly clouding his face.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Go ahead and serve her. Until the regular crowd comes in, I’ll straighten up here.”

“Well, don’t let me stop you,” Suzu laughed. She filled a teacup and hastened back to the dining hall.

The girl was also examining the tavern with a similarly grim expression.

“Here you go.” She placed the teacup down on the table.

The girl bowed slightly. “It’s only you, today, Suzu? The last time I came here, a tall man and a boy of fifteen or so were here.”

“You mean, Koshou and Sekki? Koshou is out on an errand. Sekki’s in the

kitchen. Did you come to see them?"

"No, not necessarily."

"My name is Suzu Ooki."

"Suzu Ooki," the girl repeated. Her name seemed to surprise her.

"Thank you for helping out on that day. I don't like to admit it but I'm grateful for what you told me about Seishuu."

"The child?"

"Seishuu? He's buried in a cemetery outside Takuhou. He was originally a child of Kei. When Kei fell into chaos, he fled to Kou. When the new empress was chosen he decided to come back. And that got him killed. He's buried in Takuhou but cannot rest in peace."

"I see," the girl said. There was anger in her countenance.

"I met Seishuu in Sou. We sailed to Kei together. There were a lot of people from Kei on the boat. They all expected that things were going to get better, now that there was a new empress. But so far, things have been disappointing. Having a new empress doesn't change anything. The marquis and the governor haven't changed." Suzu asked, "And you are?"

"Youshi," she replied. "I live in Kokei."

"Kokei. Ah, in Hokui. Next door in Ei Province. Is Ei a nice place?"

"More or less," she mumbled.

"I wonder if Kei is pretty much the same everywhere. But it's got to be better than Takuhou."

Youshi didn't answer.

"Life can be tough no matter where you live. But I do think some kingdoms are better off than others. I know there are places like that. I came from Sai. The empress of Sai is a good person. Kingdoms not blessed with good rulers are pretty pitiful."

"Yeah," Youshi nodded.

"I have to wonder what the Imperial Kei is doing, you know? Maybe she

doesn't even understand the state her kingdom is in."

"She's a puppet," Youshi abruptly blurted out.

Suzu leaned forward. "Eh?"

"She's not terribly competent. She isn't trusted by the ministers. There's not much she can do. And not much she can get them to do. So her best recourse is to shut up and do as she's told."

"Really? You seem to know a lot about Gyouten, Youshi."

Youhi shook her head. "Just rumors."

"Rumors, huh. Just like the previous empress, those in government are left to their own devices, and she remains deaf to the cries of the people. That's why she banished the province lord of Baku."

"What?" Youshi said.

Suzu furrowed her brows. "Even though the province lord of Baku is a good person, the Imperial Kei still forced him out of office. He was loved by the people of Baku. But at the same time, she gives the province lord of Wa a pass. It really is astonishing."

"Yes it is." Youshi stood up. "Sorry, but I won't be staying for dinner."

"Oh. Was it something I said?"

"No. I was passing by, and decided to drop in and see how things were going. I wasn't that hungry to start with."

"Will you come again?"

Youhi smiled thinly and nodded.

After Suzu saw her off, she tilted her head to one side and put down her cup. She noticed that Youhi hadn't even touched her tea. She said to herself, "I wonder if she got fed up with all the chit-chat."

There really weren't that many women in Kei. It was even rarer for her to meet a girl her same age. She had the feeling she carried on a bit more than usual.

Puzzling over this, she went to the kitchen and found Sekki and Koshou loitering in the doorway.

“Oh, you’re back.”

“Suzu, who was that girl?” Koshou asked, a grave expression on his face.

Suzu answered with a shake of her head. “Somebody I met before. She said she lives in Hokui.”

“Hokui.”

Sekki looked up at Koshou and said, “Rou’s house, remember?”

Koshou nodded. Again with a fierce look, he grasped her arm. “What did you talk about?”

“Nothing in particular.”

They hadn’t talked about anything unusual, that was for sure. Her complaints were no more severe than what people in Takuhou said instead of the usual hellos and goodbyes.

“She didn’t have anything to say?”

“Not especially. Ah, she did talk about the empress in Gyouten.”

“Did she strike you as well informed about Gyouten?”

“I don’t know, but . . . she said it was all rumors, though she seemed pretty knowledgeable of the place.”

Koshou glanced at Sekki. Sekki nodded. “We’d better move, then.”

“Eh?” said Suzu, turning to Sekki.

“She was here before. It was like she was looking for something. If she has a detailed knowledge of Gyouten, then she probably is from Gyouten.”

“And that means . . . ?”

“There are rumors intimating that Shoukou and Gahou have a free rein because they’ve got the Imperial Kei watching their backs. If somebody was sent from Gyouten to check out the situation here, then those rumors may be true.”

Sekki nodded at the surprised Suzu. “Get your things together. Better safe than sorry. We’ll leave here and move in with some friends of ours.”

“But . . . ”

"That girl was no ordinary person."

Chapter 54

[14-3] To Rangyoku, it was a day like any other, save the fact that Youshi had been gone now for ten days.

"When's Youshi coming back?" Keikei asked in a bored voice.

Rangyoku smiled. Keikei was lonely. Since the other children at the orphanage had died, he really did have a lot of time on his hands.

"Is Youshi gonna get married?"

"You mean, move in with that guy she went to see? Who knows."

Youshi couldn't get married until she had legally come of age. Common law marriage wasn't prohibited. If she had parents, they would have to approve, but Youshi didn't have any parents.

"Even supposing she did, she couldn't move away until she turned twenty."

As she explained this, Rangyoku found herself strangely doubting that what Keikei had proposed was true. Though Youshi was supposedly an orphan, Enho treated her more like a guest. Being a guest, she would be leaving before long.

Rangyoku had Keikei help her clean the dishes and wipe off the shelves. After straightening up the kitchen, she glanced over her shoulder at Keikei and said, "Good work. It's about time for tea. Why don't you call Enho?"

"Okay," Keikei said with a big bow, and ran off toward the study.

Rangyoku watched as he scampered into the main hall, smiling. She was proud of her little brother. He was smart and kind, a hard worker. Everybody who met him said so. Even Enho said that after elementary school, he'd recommend Keikei to the prefectural academy.

Pleased with herself, Rangyoku laughed as she arranged the utensils. She heard the door to the main wing opening.

"Enho, would you like some tea?"

No one answered. Rangyoku looked up and glanced toward the doorway. She

froze. Several men stood there, men she had never seen before.

“Yes?”

Six of them. At a glance, they seemed like ordinary men. But there was an air of danger about them. Unconsciously, Rangyoku took a step back.

One of the men shut the door and stood in front of it, blocking the way.

“Who are you? What are you doing—?”

Her inquiry cut off mid-sentence. A man produced a dagger from inside his jacket. Rangyoku screamed and spun around. Heavy footsteps pounded after her. Her arms were pinned from behind.

“What are you—”

A hand covered her mouth. The man holding her nodded to the others. The men positioned themselves next to the door.

What is going on? Who are these men?

The light footsteps padded down the hallway. It was Keikei. Rangyoku’s eyes opened wide. The door started to open. In the same instant, she twisted free with all her might and screamed, “Keikei! Run!”

Her feet were scooped out from under her and she crashed to the floor. She lifted her head and looked at the doorway. Her small sibling stood there petrified.

“Run! Keikei, Run!”

With startled eyes, Keikei turned to run. The men closed on him faster. One dragged Keikei toward him and struck him with his fist. No, not a fist, he was holding a knife in his hand.

“What’s this!” came Enho’s voice, and the sound of his feet.

At the same time, her eyes fell on Keikei body, like he had just decided to sit down. Right above his belt, the handle of the knife.

“Keikei!”

Something struck her hard in the back. Rangyoku screamed and curled into a ball. At the same time came a shooting pain and she screamed again.

She raised her head and saw Keikei kneeling there, his head almost touching the floor, and Enho running up behind him.

“Enho! Keikei!”

Before Enho reached Keikei, the men rushed at him and grabbed his arms. Enho shook himself free, knelt and picked up Keikei’s body. With remarkable strength, he clasped Keikei against his chest, cast her a glance that spoke volumes, and headed toward the courtyard.

“Enho . . . run . . .”

A man blocked his way. With Keikei still in his arms, Enho turned and ran in the direction of the study, the men in pursuit.

Why? Why is this happening?

Keikei.

Rangyoku planted her hands and got to her feet. Swaying, she turned toward the doorway.

Enho.

She heard the sounds of running, the pounding of footsteps from deep within the rike. She dug her fingernails into the walls and staggered down the corridor, gripping the handrail. Should she rush outside to get help? She hesitated, then continued on down the hallway, clinging to the railing.

Keikei.

She ran with a lurching jog, ignoring the burning pain in her back. She came to the walk between the guest room and the study and found Keikei and Enho lying there on the floor.

“Enho!”

“Rangyoku, get away from here!”

“But!” She looked down at her brother crumpled on the floor. The small pool of blood was growing. Keikei didn’t move, not for her cries, not for her tears.

This can’t be happening.

“Rangyoku!”

She came back to her senses. The men rushed at them, weapons in hand. Instinctively, she turned and ran sluggishly down the corridor. A blade struck her in the back. The impact drove her to her knees. She rolled to the floor, picked herself up, ran on. The weapons slashed at her feet, slammed against the back of her neck. She stumbled into the closest doorway.

Safe haven.

It was the guest room. Her eyes fell on the door to the bedroom. She reached out and crawled toward it.

The lock.

As Rangyoku opened the door and plunged inside, she felt another sharp shock of pain in her back. *Ah*, she sighed. Something warm flowed down from the back of her neck and across her chest. She grabbed hold of a shelf and collapsed, unable to support herself. A small box tumbled off the shelf and fell open next to her.

It's Youshi's, she thought listlessly. *What a strange girl. Now there'll be nobody at the rike at all. Enho will be lonely.*

“Enho!”

She'd left him behind. What would become of him now?

What did we ever do to them?

The sight of her brother lying in a pool of blood pained her far more than her own blood gathering around her. He was still so small. Such a good kid. The only person left in her family. When their parents died, they had joined hands and gone on living together.

What a sad kingdom this was. Being born in Kei was such a pitiful fate. Kei had killed their parents, had tried to banish her, and in the end even pursued them to this orphanage, where at last they had made a peaceful life for themselves. Kei was in such chaos that hoodlums and thieves had a free rein.

Youshi— Rangyoku thought, unconsciously tightening her grip on the small square of cloth in the palm of her hand. *Strike down Keikei's killers. Show them no mercy.*

There was a hard object in the cloth. Dazed, she stared at her hand and saw gold glimmering between her fingers.

What's this?

A golden seal with an engraved face.

What's it doing here?

Heavy footsteps approached. Rangyoku tightened her grip around it, to hide it from the assassins. A second, a third sharp pain pierced her back.

The Imperial Seal of the Imperial Kei.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

Help us, Youshi. Please. The way you saved us from the Kyuuki. Save us. Save the people of Kei.

Chapter 55

[14-4] “You may leave.”

Keiki spoke softly to his shirei. The two youma wordlessly vanished. Kokei and Hokui were visible not too far off in the distance. As usual, they had alighted in a forest a safe remove from the highway.

Keiki’s lord stood next to him, sullen and silent. *What kind of person is the province lord of Baku?* she’d asked him.

Something happened in Takuhou. He did not know what she’d heard there, but when she came to where he was waiting outside the city that was the question she’d posed to him. Keiki hadn’t entered the city. The smell of death was too overwhelming.

Youko had returned in something of a rage. He hadn’t inquired of the shirei who’d accompanied her as to the specifics of the situation. He had no idea why Her Highness asked such a question with such vehemence, and she wouldn’t reveal her real intentions.

“Your Highness has been fully informed, has she not?”

“I haven’t. That’s why I asked.”

“You dismissed Koukan knowing nothing of his temperament?”

Youko had no ready answer.

“I recommended to Your Highness that she act only after making a thorough investigation, that she not rely solely on the word of her ministers. And yet, at this juncture, you pose such a question to me?”

“And investigations were done. Koukan refused to cooperate with the pretender because he had designs on the throne. He envied me and tried to assassinate me. The plot was revealed and he fled.”

“Yes, that is how things stand.”

“Now I hear that Koukan is beloved by the people of Baku.”

“I have heard such things as well.”

“Then why wasn’t I told!”

“I shall look into the matter. However, had I deigned to defend Koukan, would Your Highness have listened to me?”

Youko again was at a loss for words.

“In terms of protecting Koukan, I asked on many occasions that Your Highness reconsider his dismissal. Did you not value the words of the ministers over my advice? I said I did not think Koukan was the man being so described. Why ask me at this late date, having already dismissed him?”

“What do you think of him?”

“He struck me as a capable man, though I have only met him twice. That was the impression he left upon me.”

“Dammit, Keiki!”

“Shall I take that to mean you have amended your opinion of him? Among others, you have the words of the ministers, the testimony of the witnesses, and my own advice. Did you not consider all points of view?”

“Enough already,” she spat out.

Traveling from Takuhou to Kokei, she didn’t say another word. And now she stared sullenly at Kokei.

“Your Highness, the gates are closing.”

“I know,” she growled.

“Is Your Highness upset with me?”

She was standing with her back to him. “No.” She shook her head. “I’m just pissed at myself.”

Keiki sighed. His words were not sufficient. It was not that he was sparing with his words, but that they were never appropriate to the moment. Only afterwards would he realize their insufficiency.

“I do apologize.”

"It's not your fault." She glanced back at him, a confused smile rising to her face. "Sorry for losing my temper. You know me, flying off at the handle at all."

"I should have said more."

"Naw. I wouldn't have listened. Sorry about all that. Let's go."

The expression on his lord's face urged him on. Briefly Keiki found himself smiling. The resolute heart of a forgiving lord gave him much cause to rejoice. But at the same time, his thoughts were tinged with longing and regret.

No, said that youthful and dearly-missed voice. I won't jump to conclusions. Better to ask you directly.

Keiki stared up at the dark indigo heavens. *That kingdom must be there, somewhere over yonder skies.*

Youko thought as they walked back to Kokei, *I am so incomplete in so many ways.* And not trusting Keiki was first on the list.

"You heading back?" she asked as they passed through the gate.

Keiki looked up at the sky. "I believe there is enough time to say hello to Enho. I will return afterwards."

"That's the kind of guy Enho is, huh?"

"Indeed he is." A worried look flashed across his face. "He was originally from Baku. A man well versed in the Way, in logic and in reason. To tell the truth, I received a request from the marquis. There were those who envied Enho's popularity and the great regard in which he was held, and wished him harm. Consequently, I received a communiqué from the marquis requesting that he be transferred to Ei Province."

"From Koukan. I see."

And fearing that Youko nursed a grudge against him, Keiki had not revealed this to her. Considering all this, she laughed in self-derision. *I really do have some ways to go.*

Turning these thoughts on her mind, she turned the corner adjacent the rike and continued on several paces when Keiki suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“What is it?”

“I smell . . . blood,” he said, his forehead deeply furrowing.

Youko examined their surroundings. It was a town in winter and the streets were deserted.

“You’re kidding.” She felt a thump in her heart and took off running. She ran through the gate into the rike, sprinted into the main hall and froze.

Drops of blood dotted the floor.

The living room was empty. She felt no other presence in the rike.

“Rangyoku! Keikei!”

The trail of blood continued on down the hallway.

“Enho!”

She ran toward the back of the rike. At her feet, a youma appeared, saying, “The enemy is not here.” She acknowledged the voice and kept running. Turning a corner, she found Keikei, collapsed in the corridor.

“Keikei!”

Youko raced up to him and fell to her knees. A knife was buried deeply in the small body. When she touched him, there seemed to be no energy left in his body at all.

“Keikei!”

“Do not try to move him.” Youko looked back at Keiki’s grimacing face. “There is still breath in him. Hyouki, take the child to Kinpa Palace.”

“We won’t make it in time,” the low voice said.

But Keiki nodded and said anyway, “If the occasion requires it, I shall carry him and go on ahead.”

“By your command,” came the gruff answer.

The red panther materialized beneath Keikei’s body and hoisted the child onto its back. At the same time, a woman with white feathered arms appeared and bore him up.

Youko said, "Hyouki, Kaiko, please do this for me."

She looked around. The blood continued on into the guest quarters. Following the trail, she arrived at her own room. The floor was smeared with blood and gore. In the face of the horror, Keiki faltered and could not proceed.

"Keiki, don't push yourself. Get out of here."

"But—"

"Look after Keikei for me. Get him to a doctor. There's not a moment to lose."

"Yes, but—"

Heedlessly, Youko entered the living room. She noticed that the door to the bedroom was open and headed toward it. Inside was the body of a girl.

"Rangyoku!"

Youko ran up to her, put her hand on her shoulder, and immediately withdrew it. She covered her face with her hands. "Why?"

Rangyoku was dead.

Youko couldn't begin to imagine who could hate Keikei and Rangyoku enough to kill them. Rangyoku's back was covered with countless wounds. She could not begin to grasp a reason for such brutality.

"Why did this happen?" She tore at her hair and then suddenly lifted her head.
"Enho?"

"He is not here," said Hankyo.

"Not here?"

"Nowhere in the rike. I have searched every nook and cranny. Neither Enho nor his corpse."

"How do you know?"

"I smell three different bloods. He would seem to have been wounded. I conclude he was kidnapped."

Youko bit her lip. Several nights before, a number of men had surrounded the rike. Perhaps men who had come to see Enho, men with dark faces. Perhaps men

from Takuhou. It wouldn't necessarily have changed anything if she *had* been able to connect the dots, but it grieved her that she hadn't been able to protect them.

"Rangyoku, I'm sorry," she said, stroking her back.

Youko straightened Rangyoku's tangled hair. Her hands were clasped together beneath her body. It struck Youko as such a piteous posture that she pulled her arms out from under her. Her right hand was tightly curled into a fist. From the shape of her fist, it was obvious she was holding onto something. Youko took hold of the still warm hand and gently pried open the fingers. The golden seal tumbled out.

"Oh, Rangyoku."

Youko looked at the seal and at Rangyoku with wide eyes. In the end, had she grasped what it meant? She wouldn't have had time check the impression on the seal. Even if she had, with her wounds, and the fact that the impression was the mirror-image of the characters themselves, would have made reading it difficult, if not impossible.

As Youko pondered this, she also considered the significance of how Rangyoku had hidden it, beneath her body, trying to keep it from being discovered. And the only people she could be hiding it from could have been the killers. But why had she hidden it? Because it belonged to Youko, because it was made out of gold. Or both.

"Rangyoku . . . thank you." She didn't want to cry, but couldn't hold back the tears. "I am so sorry."

If she hadn't left the rike, she could have protected them.

"Hankyo, where is Keiki?"

"Returning to the palace."

Youko nodded. At the very least, Keiki alone must survive. If he did not, mere condolences would hardly be enough.

A child also died in Takuhou.

Biting her lip, Youko looked down at Rangyoku. She bowed her head to the

floor. "This sorry excuse for an empress truly begs your forgiveness."

Part XV

Chapter 56

[15-1] A moonless night. The wind roared. Not a light was on in the rike. Youko sat listlessly in the empty main hall. Keiki had transformed into a unicorn and was bearing Keikei to the palace. Keikei was still alive. But whether or not he could be saved depended on the doctors.

Hyouki said, “The Taiho is not well.”

Youko nodded.

“What happened here?” the town manager had asked when he saw Rangyoku’s body. He covered his face with his hands. “And Keikei and Enho?”

“They’re not here,” was Youko’s only reply.

What would she do if he died? And if he lived, how would she explain his sister’s death? And Enho’s absence?

The elders didn’t have to say it. *I should have been here.* If she’d been here, three people would not have met such terrible fates.

She said to Hyouki, “Please tell Keiki I’m thankful for all he’s done. Take all due care with Keikei.”

“By your command. What shall be your next move?”

“I’m going to look for Enho.”

“Empress—”

“I do have some idea about what I’m doing. No matter what, I will find Enho and apprehend the brigands who did this.”

“The Taiho will worry.”

“Tell Keiki he can rest assured I won’t do anything reckless, but I just can’t sit around here twiddling my thumbs.”

“That is what I shall communicate to him.”

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Hyouki's voice ceased. In the dead calm, the sound of wind filled the main hall. There was no one here to light the fires. The girl who worked so diligently keeping the coals stoked and the warm steam rising from the stove, she was not here. She would never return again.

Youko picked up the sword she had cast onto a nearby chair. The *Suiguu-tou*, the Water Monkey Sword, Imperial Regalia of the Kingdom of Kei.

The great power of a youma's soul was sealed into its blade and scabbard. If she could master it well, the sword would show her the past, the present, and the future, and that which was far from her. The sword could also read the human heart.

Youko drew out the sword far enough to expose the blade and stared at the gleaming steel. This sword had, in fact, been smelted from water, and changed its shape according to the lord who possessed it. The Imperial Tatsu created the Suiguu-tou. At first, the sword had no scabbard and resembled a long-handled scimitar. The Imperial Tatsu christened it the Water Smelted Sword (*Suikan-tou*). Knowing of its powers to befuddle its lord, the Imperial Tatsu later fashioned a scabbard to bind it. Since naming it the Suiguu-tou, its shape had changed with each new monarch. Now it rested in her hands as a plain sword.

Even as an axe or a stave, the scabbard must attend to that shape. Without the scabbard, it had the mysterious power to turn on its owner. Yet Youko had lost the original scabbard, leaving only its dead shell behind. The scabbard in its current form had already proved incapable of sealing the sword's power.

I should probably call it the Water Smelted Sword from now on.

Although the Winter Ministry created a new scabbard for the sword, it did little to check its power. Far from it, when removed from the binding force of the scabbard, the sword ran wild, tormenting her day after day. Even now, Youko could not control the naked sword, experiencing nothing but cryptic visions and nightmares.

The ministers all silently reproved Youko for losing the precious scabbard, a crown jewel without peer in the known world.

Youko stared at the blade. Finally, she sighed. "It's no good." She could see no sign of Enho anywhere in the visions that emerged from the sword. "Hankyo," she said.

"Yes," he answered from the darkness.

"I'm going to sleep for a while. Please wake me up before the gates open. I want to set out for Takuhou first thing in the morning."

"By your command," the voice alone replied.

Early in the morning, Youko entered Hokui and went straight to the residence of the man named Rou. The strange, shrouded man had led her to Rou. At his place, she'd also observed the big man she'd seen at the inn in Takuhou. The men who had some time ago surrounded the rike were also from Takuhou. Youko had to believe they were all involved one way or another.

Trudging through the fierce winter air, she finally arrived at Rou's residence, and after wandering about for a while, knocked on the front gate. The inside of the residence was deathly silent. She was pounding more determinedly on the door when an old man passed by in the street.

"What with all this noise at this hour? Rou's not here."

Youko glanced back over her shoulder at the melancholy face of the old man. "Not here?"

"Neither hide nor hair. Probably took off in the middle of the night. Don't know what's going on, but what with all those shady character coming and going, I'm sure something was afoot."

"When was that?"

"It's been a while, now. Say, about a half a month ago."

Half a month ago had been when Youko first came here. "Would you happen to know any of these men who were coming and going? I'd like to know where he went."

"Hard to tell. At any rate, every last one of them looked to be up to no good." Then something came to him. "There was this creepy-looking fellow who came by now and then. Rode a real fine horse. Looked like a man trying hard not to be

seen."

"He wore a shroud over his face?"

"Yeah, that's one way to describe it. A man about forty, I'd say."

"About forty." Youko couldn't think of anybody meeting that description.

"So, was this Rou up to something?"

"Not that I know of."

"Hmph," the old man snorted. "Sure seemed to me he was up to something. He wasn't from around these parts to begin with."

"He wasn't originally from Hokui?"

"Not hardly. Fall of last year, he showed up and settled down here with hardly a *how-do-you-do* to anybody in the neighborhood. Best not to get involved with that sort. Definitely not good people."

"I see." Youko thanked him with a nod of her head.

She left Hokui and called Hankyo. He was among the fleetest footed of all the pegasi. Traveling by means of the *tonkou* he could get there all the faster. But Hankyo couldn't carry her through the earth with him. She had to ride.

From a discreet place along the highway, she mounted up and in a flash had arrived at Takuhou. She dismounted near Takuhou, passed through the gate and headed to the inn she'd already visited twice already. There had to be connection there.

The men who'd been spying on the rike had returned to Takuhou. The first time she'd come here, the men at the inn struck her as a dangerous and formidable sort. She couldn't risk trusting them. As for the shrouded man and the man named Rou, she was already out of leads. The man at the inn, who'd been to Rou's place in Hokui—she had no choice but to doubt him as well.

She ran down the alleyway, heavy with stagnant air, and stopped in her tracks. The inn was there as she remembered it. She approached the entranceway and put her hand on the door.

Curiously, the door didn't move. The windows facing the thoroughfare were

tightly shuttered. She knocked lightly on the door. Just as at Rou's place, there was no answer.

What is going on?

She hit the door with her fist, then turned and hurried over the house facing the inn and pounded on the locked doors. "Who's that?" came the immediate answer. A man in his fifties poked out his head.

"Excuse me, but I was wondering about the inn."

"Ah," said the man, glancing across the street. "They appeared to have closed up shop."

"Closed? I was here yesterday and it was open."

"Late last night, they packed up and left."

"Last night . . ." Youko clenched her fists. "And that big guy was one of them?"

"Oh, you mean Koshou? Yeah, he is a big fellow."

"And a boy of about fourteen or so."

"Sekki, you mean. He's Koshou's kid brother. Did you come to see Koshou?"

"Not them. I came to see a girl, Suzu."

"I see," said the man, suppressing a yawn. He scratched at the back of his neck. "The girl with the sansui. They all left. Sorry, but I didn't find out where they went. Who are you, anyway?"

Youko answered with a slight nod, turned and walked away. She heard the man's angry voice behind her but she didn't look around. Yesterday, hadn't Suzu said that Koshou was out? Hadn't she said that he'd be back?

Koshou had gone somewhere. Why close the inn and disappear? The rike had been attacked at the same time.

"Koshou . . ."

She couldn't believe these events were unrelated. They attacked the rike and then absconded. At any rate, it'd be ridiculous to ask whether Suzu would be returning. She asked herself, "What the hell should I do now?"

The shrouded man whose presence caused Enho so much grief showed up at Rou's house. He'd met Koshou there. These men, also involved with the rike, had returned to Takuhou. Koshou, Sekki, the kaikyaku Suzu, and the child who had died in Takuhou—she simply couldn't see how they were all connected.

"I've got to find Koshou."

It was too soon to give up. Koshou, Sekki, and Suzu—Suzu had a sansui with her and a sansui could be tracked.

"I am definitely going to find them."

Chapter 57

[15-2] The house where Shoukei made herself useful was frequented by thirty or so people on a daily basis. At least fifty had stayed there at any one time. Moreover, they were clearly associates of Kantai.

Calling them mercenaries was no exaggeration. Many rode as bodyguards with the caravans arriving at and departing Meikaku. However, an equal number were holed up at the house, apparently waiting for something to happen. They didn't seem employed, but a significant number of them came and went quite frequently. Kantai didn't have a job. He was in charge of those at the house.

"Are you stuck here because you helped me?" Shoukei asked him one day.

Kantai shook his head. "Naw, I'm just a lazy bum."

With a lot of time on their hands, the boarders often jested with swords and lances. Kantai didn't participate. For the most part, he only watched. But there was no doubt that the leader of the pack was Kantai. They paid him deference, and used polite language when addressing him. Shoukei was treated as his guest. Though Shoukei worked for her rent, hardly anybody except Kantai asked her to do anything. Her impression was that a great variety of people had taken advantage of Kantai's offer of lodging. What they really all had in common was the same hatred of Gahou, Province Lord of Wa.

Self-made knights in shining armor.

They were a defiant and disciplined group of errant knights, united in opposition to Gahou. Shoukei got that much. From the way Kantai looked after them, she had a hunch there was more to it than that, though.

Where does the money come from?

He must have been raised in a wealthy household. Only that could account for the indifferent manner in which he spread the cash around. *Perhaps, it occurred to Shoukei, all these mercenaries were in fact working for Kantai. Or perhaps Kantai himself...*

Pondering these things as she filled the cistern in the courtyard, the sound of

horses' hooves came from the frontage of the building. Through the open main gate she saw a carriage drive up. A man stepped down from the carriage. A shroud covering his head and his face hidden from sight, he entered the gate. He took it upon himself to shut the doors. He finally raised his head and she heard the sound of the carriage departing.

"Um—?" Shoukei said.

He lowered the shroud to his shoulders, revealing a man in his forties. There was a great aura of authority about him. "And you are?" he asked, in a deep voice.

Keeping her doubts to herself, Shoukei replied with a slight bow. "I do odd jobs around the place. And who might you be?"

"I came to see Kantai. Is he in?"

"Ah, yes."

The man nodded, and without further ado, headed toward the main wing. He showed no signs of wishing Shoukei to get Kantai for him or show him the way. Shoukei hurried after him.

"Um, excuse me, but how should I address you?" Shoukei knew that this was a residence that anybody and everybody were free to enter when they wished. But even without anybody saying so, she clearly got the sense that a person of unknown provenance could not simply wander in off the street. "Are you a friend of Kantai's?"

Shoukei placed herself in his path, blocking his way. The man smiled. "I see. He finally found himself a capable handmaid. My name is Saibou. Please announce my presence to Kantai."

I'm not a handmaid, Shoukei said to herself, running up the stairs. She was almost to the living area when Kantai came out. "Kantai," she said.

"Right," said Kantai with a nod of his head. He must have heard her voice from the courtyard. He bowed his head low. Saibou nodded in a mindful manner, climbed the stairs, and entered the parlor.

"Kantai, that man is—"

"Yes, of course. I'll introduce you. Hold your horses."

She trailed after him. Perhaps, it now occurred to her, Kantai had been hired by somebody and that somebody was this Saibou.

The parlor was right off the main hall. Hanging on the back wall were two banners decorated with Chinese characters. Between them was a decorative scroll. Below the scroll was a shelf, and in front of the shelf were a desk and two chairs. This was the study of the master of the house, but Saibou sat down as if he owned the place, and greeted Shoukei and Kantai.

"You hired yourself an interesting girl."

Kantai smiled. "I didn't exactly hire her." He briefly explained how she had come to join them.

"I see," said Saibou with a small smile. "A girl with pluck. But I take it she was less than familiar with the risks of throwing a stone at a government official in Wa Province."

"Not necessarily. She's a refugee from Hou."

Saibou leaned forward and looked at her. "From Hou. Where were you born?"

Shoukei hesitated a moment, deciding whether to be honest and say Hoso, the capital of Hou, or Shindou in Kei Province. "Hoso," she said.

"Shoukei of Hoso. Huh." He didn't pursue the matter further. "So, Shoukei, do you understand what kind of people are gathered here?"

"I have a pretty good idea."

Saibou nodded. "Wa Province is a reflection of the temperament of Marquis Gahou. He oppresses the people, disregarding the honor of the empress and the will of the kingdom. Corrupt retainers who would shake the roots of Kei cannot be left to their own devices."

"Yes."

"By all rights, the empress should direct the affairs of the kingdom. But she hadn't been on the throne long, and the Imperial Court is in the back pocket of officials who took advantage even before the Late Empress Yo. Having been enthroned for barely half a year, it is doubtful that the empress has the means to

resist them. Taking control of the court and extending the rule of law to the Nine Provinces by itself would be next to impossible. On top of that, the empress is a taika and knows little of Kei.”

Shoukei nodded.

“If we investigate Gahou here and raise a stink about the chaos in Wa Province and about Gahou’s misrule, the empress is bound to pay more attention to the suffering in all the Nine Provinces. And when she deigns to pay attention, we shall petition her with all of the resources at our command.”

“I understand.”

“For the good of Wa Province, more than toppling Gahou, more than anything else, the Empress must be made aware of conditions here in Wa. Not overthrowing Gahou would be acceptable if the Empress were able to judge the situation correctly. Otherwise, we will no doubt be named enemies of Gahou *and* the crown, and will be destroyed. In light of all this, will you still stand by Kakutai, Shoukei?” Saibou addressed Kantai as “Kakutai.”

Shoukei tightened her hand into a fist. “Yes. I truly believe the Imperial Kei will recognize our cause.” She believed because of the way Rakushun cared so much about her. Even having attained the throne in her unfinished state, an empress who worried so much about whether or not she was fit for the role should be nobody’s fool.

Saibou smiled. “I see. Our guest from Hou believes in the empress. There’s something ironic about that.”

“And you don’t believe in her?”

“Because there are those who believe, I would like to as well.”

“Eh?”

Saibou didn’t respond but rapped lightly on the desk. “In any case, we welcome you, Shoukei. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“And I yours.”

Next to her, Kantai tilted his head quizzically. “You didn’t come all the way here to see Shoukei, did you?”

"Of course not," Saibou smiled. "Yes, I did have something I needed to do. I came to tell you, Kakutai."

"What is it?"

"A man by the name of Enho, the superintendent in Hokui, Ei Province—more specifically, the town of Kokei—has disappeared."

"By disappeared, you mean—"

"Yesterday, the rike in Kokei was attacked and a girl was murdered. Her younger brother and the superintendent were apparently kidnapped. Nothing was stolen from the rike. I have no idea why it was attacked. Men had been observed hanging around the rike. The word is, they were from Takuhou."

"Takuhou."

"Yesterday in Takuhou, the gates opened after sunset to admit a single carriage."

"Yes, of course."

Shoukei looked up at Kantai. "Meaning?"

"There is another beast in Takuhou, a man by the name of Shoukou. The gates could only have been opened after they were closed on the orders of somebody very high up. In the case of Takuhou, the first name that springs to mind is Shoukou. Turn over that rock, and you will definitely find Gahou there."

"So Gahou commanded Shoukou to kidnap the superintendent?" asked Shoukei.

Saibou smiled thinly. "Let's not rush to conclusions. That's what I'd like you to investigate."

"Oh. Yes."

"And one other thing. A package will arrive here tomorrow. I'd like you to deliver it to Rou in Hokui."

Kantai replied with a ironic smile. "Rou moved to Houkaku. Seems there was someone sniffing around his place."

Saibou furrowed his brow. "Rou moved?"

"I'm sure he'll fill me in when we deliver the goods."

Saibou nodded. "It's a shipment of winter weapons, twenty pieces. I shall leave their disposition to your good offices."

Kantai bowed low. "By your command."

Chapter 58

[15-3] Koshou and company moved to a brothel in the southwest corner of Takuhou. It was a brothel only in name. With so few women about, there weren't many left to do the entertaining. The remaining working girls had moved to higher class establishments in the eastern part of the city. The only ones who remained were two women well past their primes. Like the madam, they were friends of Koshou.

The character of a city depended a great deal on the *where* and the *what*. In most cases, the urban centers bordered the government offices to the south, with commercial markets located along the loop road. For both markets and residential areas, the low rent districts were found in the west and trended richer toward the east.

"In fact, urban neighborhoods are supposed to be located in the northern section," Sekki instructed Suzu. The two of them were cleaning up around the forlorn brothel.

"Why?"

"Don't know. It seems to have been that way in older cities. That's what it says in old books: the government compound is located in the center, and the commoners' residences are built to the north. In such a city, the west would enjoy a higher social status than the east. But most cities are the exact opposite."

Suzu said, "In all the cities I've been to, the most crowded areas are in the south, family estates in the center, and mausoleums and temples in the north."

"That's how it is, isn't it? You very often find that things are the opposite in cities that have been around for a long time, that haven't met with disaster. At some point, it all got turned upside down. It really is quite odd."

"Are you interested in things like that, Sekki?"

"Yeah," Sekki nodded, as he washed the cooking utensils.

"It's too bad you had to quit school."

"Yeah. But I don't think this is the time to indulge such thoughts. It would have been nice to be born in an era when a worthy empress resided in the capital and the kingdom was at peace. But that's just the way things are."

"It would have been nice to have been born in En or Sou."

Sekki smiled bitterly. "Unfortunately, imagining doesn't make it so. I was born in Kei. At the end of the day, you're born where you're born and there's only so much you can change after that."

"You really do have a good head on your shoulders, Sekki. I understand why Koshou is so disappointed in the way things have turned out."

"I do worry about my big brother. It's in his nature to get more upset about what happens to others than to himself. He's always making other people's fights his own. But taking on something this big is amazing."

Suzu stopped what she was doing for a moment and blinked. "You don't agree with what he's doing?"

"That's not what I mean. But as much as the people of this town make my brother mad, he doesn't get mad at Shoukou. In other words, if he got really worried and started thinking seriously about how to dispose of Shoukou, he'd conclude it'd be better to go on living and putting up with whatever came his way."

"I get that." Suzu gazed at her hands. Getting injured always hurt. After a while, you reflexively became afraid of the pain. So you soldiered on in order to escape the pain. But at the same time, the soldiering on began to feel like an accomplishment, when nothing was actually changing.

Sekki sighed. "But what if my brother attacks Shoukou and fails? Shoukou will become enraged, and life will only get worse for the people of Shisui. The people of Shisui, in turn, will hate my brother."

"That's probably true."

"That's why it's just too risky to leave him to his own devices. But I really don't know if I'm being a help or a hindrance."

Sekki grinned mischievously. Suzu smiled as well. At that point, the

aforementioned Koshou appeared. Suzu and Sekki exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

“What’s going on?”

“Oh, nothing. What’s up?”

Kousho beckoned to Suzu from the kitchen door. “Sorry, but I have a job for your sansui.”

“You need to transport something?” Kousho often had Suzu carry goods to villages in the surrounding areas.

“Yes, but this time it’s a bit further. A two-day journey to the east by horse cart, there’s a city called Houkaku. Here’s a map. Go to Rou’s place. He should have the items we’ve requested.”

Hansei Rou and Kousho were old friends.

“I understand.”

“I’m sure Rou will do a good job packing them, but even if stopped by sentries, we cannot permit this shipment to be opened. If they were, they’re bound to be stolen.”

“These are items you don’t want anybody to see?”

Kousho nodded. “Winter weapons.”

Suzu stiffened at the mention of the term.

“They’re heavy but not that bulky. Once they arrive, we need to get these winter weapons into the most skilled hands of our group.”

Suzu nodded. “That’s fine. I’ll be going, then.”

The next morning, Suzu left Takuhou and headed east on the main highway. On a sansui, the trip took half a day. Suzu arrived at Houkaku by noon. Houkaku was as big a city as Takuhou. Houkaku was the capital of Rouya prefecture, which was next to Shisui prefecture.

According to the map Kousho had drawn, Suzu looked for a house in the southwest part of the city. She found there a broken-down dump of a residence. The main gate facing the street was tightly shut. When she knocked on the gate,

a fifty-something man with odd, mottled brown hair appeared.

“Who is it?”

Suzu bowed, greeting him as Koshou had instructed her. “I’ve come from Shikin, county of San, in Baku Province.”

The man eyes suddenly fell upon her hands, focusing on her ring finger. “Come in.”

Rou was cooperating in Koshou’s cause, but he wasn’t an intimate member of their group. The greeting was not used when seeing friends, but to establish Suzu’s bono fides as a trustworthy ally.

Through the door was a narrow courtyard. At the back of the courtyard was an old house no wider than the yard, a small building no larger than a shack. Suzu led the sansui into the courtyard. The man closed the gate behind her and said, “I’m Hansei Rou. Koshou and I hail from the same home town.”

“Yes. I came to pick up the shipment.”

“Right,” Rou nodded. He said with a grim expression, “That is the case, but the shipment in question hasn’t arrived.”

“Eh?”

“Today, I was supposed to get two separate shipments but neither has arrived. I’m sorry. Perhaps I could ask you to wait?”

“Okay,” said Suzu. Koshou had told her to follow Rou’s instructions after she got here.

“If the shipments arrive this evening, I’ll have to ask you stay overnight. The place is a mess, but there is a room where you can sleep. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“It’s fine. No problem.”

“You might as well sit back and relax. I’ll get water for that fine horse of yours. Would you like some tea?”

“Sure,” Suzu said, with a nod.

Rou wasn’t a handsome man but proved to be a good talker. They sat down at

a stone table and watched the sansui munching on the feed and conversed about this and that.

"So you're all the way from Sai? That must have been one long trip."

"I came most of the way by ship."

"What do you think of Kei? Must be pretty cold compared to Sai."

"I was with a troupe of traveling entertainers for a while, so I've been all over the place."

"How about that."

A knock came at the gate. "And now they show up!" Rou playfully scowled. He opened the doors. After exchanging a few words with the visitor in a low voice, a girl about Suzu's age appeared leading a horse. Her hair was mottled like Rou's but a dark blue color. It struck Suzu as quite extraordinary.

"At least twenty have arrived," Rou said with forced smile. He showed the girl to the table. "Why don't you take your time as well?"

"But—" the girl said, glancing up at him.

"Sorry," said Rou. "Without all thirty pieces, this girl isn't going to pay me. And without that money, I can't pay you."

Suzu raised her voice. "If that's the case, I can pay—"

Rou raised his hand, cutting her off. "No. My place, my rules, and that's not my line of business. I'm the broker not a dealer."

"Oh, okay."

Rou grinned and glanced over his shoulder at the girl. "That being the case, you'll have to wait for a while. Save your complaints for the tardy party. Would you like some tea, too?"

"Thank you," she nodded.

Suzu gave her a good, long look. From the bone structure of her face, she could tell she was a beautiful woman. They were about the same age. At Rou's urging, she sat down in one of the stone chairs and glanced at Suzu. Her gaze quickly moved onto the sansui.

"A sansui," she said.

Suzu leaned forward. "Are you familiar with sansui?"

"I've seen one or two before."

"Oh. I'm from Takuhou. I'm Suzu. And you are?"

"I came from Meikaku. My name is Shoukei."

"We seem about the same age. How old are you?"

Shoukei momentarily mulled the question over. "Sixteen."

So was she, but Suzu hesitated. What was the best way to describe her age? She was swept into this world at the age of fourteen, twelve by the way birthdays were counted here. After that, she'd wandered hither and yon for four years, and then had become a wizard. That would make her sixteen, more or less.

"I'm the same age," Suzu said. Shoukei tilted her head to one side but said nothing more. Suzu said, "Shoukei, are you a subject of Kei?"

"No. I'm from Hou."

"Hou? The northwest kingdom in the Kyokai?"

"Yes. One of the four Outland Kingdoms. How about yourself?"

"I'm from Sai. We've both come from far away kingdoms."

"Indeed," laughed Shoukei.

Suzu felt herself relaxing. "This is nice. It's not often that I've gotten to meet a girl my same age in Kei."

"That's true. So why have you traveled so far to get here?"

Suzu pondered the question. She'd set out on her journey for any numbers of reasons, and all of them were dead and gone. Her past desires had no relationship to who she was now. "Oh, this and that."

"This and that brought you all the way to Kei?"

"Well, first of all, I heard that the empress of Kei was a girl my same age—"

Shoukei blinked.

“—and that she was a kaikyaku like me.”

“You’re also from Yamato?”

“Yes, that’s right. With no place to call my own, I thought I’d call the kingdom of a fellow kaikyaku my home. Does that make any sense?”

Shoukei looked at her, her face blank with surprise. Finally she laughed. “Me, too.”

“Eh? You’re a kaikyaku?”

“No. I also came to this kingdom to see the Imperial Kei—”

Suzu gaped at her.

“—because she was an empress the same age as me.”

“That’s weird. So the two of us, from Sai and Hou, came here to see the Imperial Kei and just happened to meet.”

“Sure seems like it.”

“Wow.”

“You’re not kidding.”

Suzu and Shoukei giggled. “Hey!” came Rou’s voice behind them. “No carrying on personal conversations!”

Suzu looked back with surprise, Rou was standing there, teacups in hand, and a sour look on his face. “No private chitchat between people who meet here. My place, my rules.”

“Oh . . . sorry.”

“I’m a broker of things, not of people. People who use my services are people with a reason for being here. No shady types set one foot inside the gate. And whatever reasons the two of you have, best you not know too much about each other.”

“Sure,” said Suzu, with a shrug of her shoulders. She glanced at Shoukei and caught her looking the same way, and for a moment their eyes met.

Chapter 59

[15-4] The next shipment didn't arrive until just before the gates closed. As Suzu and Shoukei couldn't leave Houkaku, they had no choice but to stay the night at Rou's place. They ended up sleeping in a small room furnished with a divan and a bed without a canopy. Two people in a space meant for one.

"Which one do you want? The bed or the divan?"

"Either's fine."

"Then you take the bed. I'll sleep on the divan."

"You don't have to do that."

"I'm returning on the sansui. Meikaku is way to the east, isn't it? And you've got to go back by horse, right?"

"Meikaku is only a day's ride by horse."

"You should take the bed. It's only a half-day ride for me."

Shoukei thought about it for a minute, then nodded. "Thanks. To tell the truth, it'd be nice for a change. I've been sleeping on a couch for so long."

"Really? Well, great then."

The two girls grinned at each other.

"Suzu," Shoukei asked, "what do you do in Takuhou?" And then quickly added, "Maybe that's the kind of thing I'm not supposed to ask."

"Let's pretend we didn't hear anybody say that."

They both giggled, the private laughter filling the small room.

"Oh, I do odd jobs around the inn. How about you, Shoukei?"

"Same here."

"So how did you come across—" *those weapons*, Suzu started to ask, and thought better of the question. They were probably getting a bit over their heads with a subject like that.

But Shoukei leaned forward and answered. “It is out of the ordinary. Do you know what’s in those crates?”

“More or less.”

“Winter weapons. To be used how? And there are thirty of them. Not things you can easily lay your hands on.”

“Did the people you got them from say what they would do with the weapons?”

“I was only asked to make the delivery.”

“Me, too.”

A moment of silence followed, the two of them exchanging glances. Shoukei smiled first. “I haven’t the slightest idea. It is unusual, amassing winter weapons like that. But somebody with money must be behind it.”

“Yeah. I guess we’ve been told only what we need to know.”

Shoukei tilted her head to the side and looked at Suzu. The girl from Takuhou was taking back a shipment of thirty winter weapons. The price of those thirty would be approximate to that of 300 ordinary weapons.

From Takuhou. “Then perhaps the target is Shoukou?”

Suzu waved her hands in denial. “No, it can’t be.”

“The man who sent me here is gathering mercenaries instead of winter weapons.”

Suzu’s eyes flew open. “Gahou.”

“Undoubtedly. Are you thinking the same thing I am?”

“Sure seems like it.”

The bedroom fell into silence. Suzu sat down on the divan and sighed. “The kid I was traveling with got killed by Shoukou.”

“Really?”

“Why can a public servant like Shoukou get away with things like that? Shisui really is an awful place.”

“I’ve heard rumors.”

“Those rumors are only half as true as reality. Seishuu—the boy I made it all the way to Takuhou with—he didn’t do anything wrong. He was killed for getting in the way of Shoukou’s carriage. I was so angry. When I try to imagine people looking the other way when things like that happen, I get so mad I can’t stand it. But Shoukou—”

“—has got Gahou watching his back.”

Suzu blinked. “You know that for certain?”

“That’s what everybody says: Gahou and Shoukou are two peas in a pod.”

“No doubt they are. I’d sure like to see Shoukou and his ilk get what they deserve. With the Imperial Kei looking out for Gahou, nobody’s going to try and punish Shoukou. That’s why we’ve got no choice but to take the initiative ourselves, right?”

“I don’t agree.”

“Eh?”

“I don’t think the Imperial Kei is doing anything like protecting Gahou. Isn’t that what the Late Empress Yo did, you mean?”

“It was true of the Late Empress Yo, and the current empress, too—”

“The person who brought me here said that the Imperial Kei simply doesn’t know about things like that.”

“But—”

Shoukei looked intently at Suzu. “When I was in Ryuu, I met a friend of the Imperial Kei.”

“You what?”

“One of her closest companions. I can’t believe she’s that bad of a person. She wouldn’t protect Shoukou or collude with Gahou.”

“Maybe not—”

“The Imperial Kei only recently ascended to the throne. There’s got to be a lot she doesn’t understand. I think that’s what it comes down to.”

"Ignorance is no defense. She's the empress, after all."

Shoukei gave Suzu a long, hard look. Then she said, "My father was the emperor."

"He . . . what?"

"The Imperial Hou. Three years ago his subjects rose up and overthrew him."

Suzu gaped at her.

"My father was detested by the people. The result of all that hate was regicide. They hate him even now. There's nothing I could do to change that. But even with a father like that, watching him die hurt terribly. Probably as much as it hurt when Seishuu died."

"Yes."

"In order to prevent my father's death, before the hate grew so intense, I should have remonstrated with him. I loathe myself now for not doing so. What if all the people surrounding the Imperial Kei are naive dunces like I was? She'll be hated like my parents were. People even said I condoned my father's sins." Shoukei lowered her gaze. "I don't know what's really happening. But if the Imperial Kei is surrounded by those kinds of people? My father was chosen by Hourin. He couldn't have been doomed from the start. But when the people around him tried to warn him and couldn't get through to him, he ended up parting from the Way."

Suzu examined the longing look on Shoukei's face, an expression that brought to mind another person she'd met recently: *she's a puppet*.

"You're right," Suzu said. Shoukei tilted her head quizzically. Suzu continued, "I met somebody else who said the same thing. Only rumors, but the word was that the empress doesn't have the trust of her retainers and can't get them to do anything she wants. So her only recourse is to do what they tell her to do."

"Yes, indeed."

"You think that's really what's going on?"

"I've heard that most of the ministers at the Imperial Court are from the era of the Late Empress Yo. I think you can guess what kind of people they are. The

same ones who stood by while the Late Empress Yo fell from Way before their very eyes.”

“But the Imperial Kei dismissed the province lord of Baku. Wasn’t he beloved by his people?”

“Standard practice for corrupt officials. Of course, beasts like Gahou and Shoukou would conspire against an accomplished and respected man like the marquis. They’d cook up some crime to frame him with.”

“But—”

“There’s a superintendent in Ei Province by the name of Enho. I’ve heard that he’s highly knowledgeable of the Way. The rike where Enho was superintendent was attacked. The attackers killed a girl and kidnapped Enho. A gang was hanging around the rike. Rumor has it they were from Takuhou. I’ve also heard that the same day Enho was assaulted, after the gates were closed they were opened again.”

“You’re kidding.” Very few people could order a city gate reopened after it was closed. “It must have been Shoukou.”

“He’s the only one who could pull off something like that, don’t you think? Just like the people around the Imperial Kei could engineer the downfall of the marquis without breaking a sweat.”

Shoukei looked into Suzu’s eyes. Her big eyes suddenly brimmed over. Shoukei watched her silently.

“The Imperial Kei . . . she’s a good person?”

“I have to think so. The way you asked, do you not like her?”

Suzu shook her head. “It’d be such a relief if she were.”

“Suzu?”

“I wanted to see her. I thought for certain she must be a good person. I met Seishuu on the ship from Sai. He was in a really bad state, and I was worried sick about him. I told him we’d go to Gyouten together . . .”

Suzu spoke his name in such a grief-stricken voice it made her heart ache.

"But he was killed by Shoukou. Anybody who'd let a beast like that run free, who'd protect him, wouldn't have done anything for Seishuu if I *had* taken him to Gyouten. So what did I bring him to Takuhou for? Just to die?"

"Suzu—" Shoukei said, taking hold of her hand.

"He was such an unfortunate kid."

"Yes, he was."

"If we had gotten to Gyouten, the Imperial Kei would have helped him."

"Of course."

Shoukei stroked the back of the sobbing Suzu. She wept like a child. It was enough to break her heart.

I only wish you could understand.

That was all she desired to say to the empress in Gyouten. Shoukei didn't know whether or not the Imperial Kei could have healed Seishuu. She wished— *I only wish you could understand how all the hopes of the people rest upon your shoulders.*

Part XVI

Chapter 60

[16-1] Shoukei picked up the reins of the horse. “Are you going straight back to Takuhou?” she asked Suzu, who was holding the reins of her sansui.

“Yes,” said Suzu.

“I hope we meet again.”

Suzu answered with a nod.

Where do you live— Shoukei almost asked, but swallowed her words. They’d talked about so much. She had the feeling they’d talked about things that would bring a scowl even to Kantai’s face. Nonetheless, she and Suzu knew the limits of what they could say to each other.

“It was really nice being able to meet you,” said Suzu, looking on the verge of tears.

Shoukei nodded firmly. “We’ll definitely see each other again, after everything settles down.”

“Yeah.”

With that, they averted their eyes and mounted up. “Later,” they said to each other, and separated on the main highway to the east and to the west.

A day’s ride brought Shoukei to Meikaku. She wrapped her shawl loosely around her head as she approached the gates. Though the search for the stone-throwing girl had been called off for the time being, she couldn’t be too cautious. The guardsman gave her a once-over but otherwise paid her no particular attention.

In Meikaku, or rather, in the cities of Hokkaku and Toukaku that had grown out of Meikaku, the criminal element was prevalent. Even if only a few of them went around throwing stones at officials, the authorities couldn’t go on chasing Shoukei forever.

The merchant caravans found themselves thrown into this cauldron of refugees and the teeming poor. It was hard to believe they didn't find it completely disorienting. With nothing to eat and with no other recourses, starving people would attack wagons hauling grain shipments and were arrested by the police. That they weren't dragged off to the main square could be considered a salvation of sorts, but nobody knew where they were held.

According to the mercenaries, even when highwaymen were arrested they could win release by greasing a few palms with their share of the loot.

The poor and downtrodden joined gangs that teamed up to attack the caravans, knowing that if they were arrested they wouldn't be punished. Even if their hard-won proceeds were confiscated, and they were lucky enough not to get arrested, at least the pressing hunger would be alleviated. And even when the caravans hired bodyguards, they surely couldn't protect every piece of cargo. Looting and plunder that began in poverty was bound to repeat itself over and over.

A training ground for thievery, that's what Kantai said. Every time he caught one of these self-made highwaymen, the stolen merchandise went to the provincial guard. It was never returned to its rightful owner. That was how Wa Province enriched itself.

Traders were aware of this but had no choice but to go through Meikaku. Smaller merchants formed their own syndicates and hired mercenaries. They bribed provincial officials and demanded that the authorities enforce the law. But depending on what was being transported, there weren't any guarantee that their own bodyguards wouldn't turn on them. In fact, it was hardly uncommon.

Strongmen with the slightest confidence in their abilities gathered from the outlying districts to find work. The competition led to bloodshed over and over.

Shoukei sighed, dismounted from the horse, and walked through the gate.

"So you're finally back. You're late."

Kantai was addressing a number of men when she entered the main hall. When he saw her, he waved the men off. The men got up and left to a separate wing.

“One other shipment didn’t arrive,” said Shoukei, and forthrightly informed him about what had transpired. She handed Kantai the money she’d gotten from Suzu via Rou.

“That’s unfortunate. Did Rou say anything more about his move to Houkaku?”

“There was a girl—” Shoukei knit her brows. Kantai had asked her to inquire into the subject and she had been told something about it.

“What?”

“Apparently there was a girl checking out Rou’s place in Hokui.”

“That’s all?”

“About the same time he was meeting with the people in Takuhou. A little while later, the same girl visited them in Takuhou. After that, Rou was warned that it’d be a good idea if they moved.”

She related the account as she’d heard it. She leaned forward. “So, what kind of man is this Rou?”

“A good man with a good heart. In short, he’s an associate of Saibou.”

“And what about Saibou? He’s the one who hired you?”

“Not the case here. He’s somebody who helped me out in the past. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Saibou helped you out? Or one of his superiors?”

Kantai eyes opened a bit wider and he smiled thinly. He motioned for her to get a chair and sit down next to him. “What do you mean by his superiors?”

“That’s the sense I got about him. It seemed to me that Saibou-sama was working for somebody, too.”

That was the impression she’d gotten from a word here and there. Somebody had asked Saibou to deliver the message to Kantai. Saibou had no faith in the empress but the man who sent him did.

Kantai answered with another wry smile. “I see, a woman’s intuition.”

“Of course. And?”

"This is the case. Except that nobody's been hired by anybody. Saibou-sama owes the man a debt and I owe them both. We all agreed that something must be done about Wa Province. To be sure, I get financing through Saibou-sama but only because the war funds have been entrusted to him."

"Meaning that Saibou's superior is the person in charge? Enho, perhaps?"

Kantai smiled softly. "I don't know Enho either. Beyond that, don't ask because I won't tell."

"Ah," said Shoukei, closing her mouth on the subject.

"There are men who live apart from society and teach the Way. Through their words, they attempt to keep the kingdom on the path of righteousness. I think Enho is one such person. I couldn't say for certain, though. There are those who try to keep the kingdom true through their actions. Those who arm themselves, as I do, resolved to support like-minded individuals through intermediaries like Rou. In this kingdom, there are many who lament what Kei has become. Not just us."

"Well . . . yes."

"The same way we have Gahou in our sights, in Takuhou there are people targeting Shoukou. Yes, I see. So there are some men with backbone still living in Takuhou."

"I met the girl from Takuhou. She took the winter weapons back with her."

Kantai furrowed his brows. "If they're amassing winter weapons then they must be getting ready to strike."

"I think so," said Shoukei, dropping her voice. She had to wonder if Suzu was okay.

"Rou is one of Saibou's old acquaintances. No, better to call him an old classmate of our superior. They both attended the Evergreen Seminary in the western province of Baku."

"A seminary? Is that like an academy?"

A great deal of self-study was required in order to gain admittance to university. To supplement that self-study, students often asked learned men to

tutor them, and learned men would in turn open private tutoring schools.

"The Evergreen Seminary was a kind of private academy that teaches not worldly knowledge but the Way. Rou is a graduate of the Evergreen Seminary. Because it was a private school, anybody could attend. Graduates of the seminary would not necessarily become public servants. But if the kingdom strays from the Way, these paladins will turn out in force."

"I see."

"Saibou and our superior graduated from the Evergreen Seminary as well. That is probably how they got to know each other. In any case, Evergreen Seminary is known throughout Kei, with many calling it their alma mater. Though not anymore."

"Not anymore? The Evergreen Seminary?"

"It was struck by arsonists a year ago. The instructors were murdered and the lecture hall destroyed. The head of the gang was apparently a drifter, a refugee, but he was killed moments before being arrested. Somebody was pulling the strings behind the scenes and made sure he wouldn't talk. Nobody knows who, though."

"Why?"

"Because some people aren't happy about the teachings of the Way. When a kingdom begins to falter, the followers of the Way are the first ones to turn their critical gaze on the government."

"I see," said Shoukei, lowering her gaze.

"Evergreen Seminary was located in the city of Shishou, San county, in Baku Province. In the past, it was called the city of Shikin. Several centuries ago, a wizard of the air by the name of Rou Shou appeared there. He was the legendary wizard who rose to wizardhood according to his own virtue and then went among the people and taught the Way. Nobody knows whether a man named Rou Shou really existed or not. San County was already famous as the home of many ministers and paladins. The citizens of San County are understandably proud of their hometown boys, and when the kingdom lurches off in some crazy direction, they're the first to raise a stink. As the center of it all, the Evergreen

Seminary no doubt caught the worst of backlash.”

“The province lord of Baku also came from that area?”

Kantai gave her a surprised look. “The marquis? I wouldn’t know. Why him, all of sudden?”

“The girl I met at Rou’s place said something to that effect. The people of Baku loved the marquis but he was dismissed anyway.”

“Yes, I see.” Kantai smiled thinly. “The province lords are not necessary children of their own provinces. Gahou was originally from Baku Province.”

“Gahou was?”

Kantai answered with a troubled smile. “You will find both devils and angels everywhere you look.”

Chapter 61

[16-2] “You’re back!”

The cheerful cry arose from the decrepit brothel in a corner of Takuhou. Having brought the shipment home safely, Suzu was bombarded with praise.

The crates were opened and winter weapons of various sizes taken out and inspected. These valuable weapons had been collected from all of the kingdoms. Buying one or two was one thing. But more than ten, and an arms dealer would definitely suspect a rebellion in the making. Putting a large cache of weapons together without considerable connections would have been well-nigh impossible.

“Thirty swords, twenty lances we had on hand from before, thirty bows and a thousand arrows—our entire stash.” Koshou looked at everybody gathered in the hall. “I know that eighty winter weapons are hardly anything divided among our thousand comrades. I’m sorry, but this is the best we can do.” His voice echoed in the silent room. “I’m also aware that going up against the governor with a mere thousand comrades-in-arms is something of a joke. Afterward, we will have no choice but to appeal to the people of Shisui and ask them to join our cause.”

“We’ll be fine!” somebody called out. “Once we raise the head of Shoukou, all those who cowered before him will surely come to realize that it is not too soon to give up the fight. I’m sure that’s how the tide will turn.”

In a corner of the hall, Suzu felt herself shiver. The man’s words sounded more like an attempt at self-persuasion. When she glanced at Sekki, standing next to the man, he had a look of forbearance on his face that no doubt matched her own.

Suzu vaguely believed that things would turn out all right for Koshou. But she didn’t know if Koshou and the rest of them understood that things weren’t fine at all.

“Sekki!” Suzu sought out Sekki from the men exiting the hall. She caught him

by the arm and dragged him into a nearby dusty guest room. “Is Koshou really okay with this?”

Sekki leaned against the wall and shrugged. “I have to think so.”

“Are a thousand really enough?”

“More than enough to take out Shoukou. He’s got a hundred guards at his private residence and take no more than fifty with him when he’s on the road.”

Suzu sighed in relief. “So one way or another—”

“The problem is what comes afterward.”

“Afterward?”

“If we can bring down a provincial governor and end up with twenty men who can still wield a sword, we’ll consider ourselves lucky. It’s not our intent to take out Shoukou merely for our own self-righteous satisfaction and then run away as fast as we can.”

“It isn’t?”

Sekki countered with an ironic smile. “That’s what criminals do, Suzu.”

“Ah . . .”

“If we assassinate Shoukou and go on the lam, the people of Takuhou will be thrown into the maelstrom. Shoukou’s colleagues within the prefectoral palace walls will surely not let the matter rest short of coming after us. This is our opportunity to execute a most meritorious deed. But Shoukou and his underlings who have been living the good life along with him are all birds of a feather. They will surely put the people of Takuhou on the rack and root out the wrong-doers. That’s why our object is not to strike at Shoukou and then quietly fade away.”

“But if you don’t—”

“Those underlings of his will be made to understand who we are and why we did what we did. While contending with those seeking retribution against us, we will attempt to flee to a neighboring province.”

“Won’t a thousand be too few to accomplish that?”

“Laughably so. Three battalions of five-hundred provincial soldiers each are

stationed in Takuhou, along with a thousand prefectoral guards and five hundred praetorians.”

“That many—”

“Not only that, but our opponents will be trained in warfare, while there are few among us who can wield a sword with any skill. As time passes, troops will no doubt be sent from Meikaku. After a few days, if only provincial troops end up garrisoned in the vicinity, I’d estimate three thousand. It’s even possible that all four divisions of the provincial guard will end up on our doorstep.”

“You can’t possibly—”

“If the people of Takuhou do not act in concert and resist them on our behalf, we will all die.”

“This is insanity! To what end?”

“To raise the banner of revolt. Killing Shoukou is not the goal. His death is not the end of our cause. After that, the people of Takuhou must show their mettle.”

“But—”

“There is no other course. If you cannot condone Shoukou and others of his ilk, then raise the banner of revolt and let the ministers and all the higher-ups know that we will not stand for their kind any longer.”

Suzu pursed her lips. “You’re right.”

“You are free to leave.”

Suzu shook her head. “No. I’m staying right here.”

Chapter 62

[16-3] Youko paced the streets of Takuhou. Her best lead was Suzu's sansui, but it was not a well-known species of pegasus. After beating the pavement and asking around, neither she nor the people she questioned were any wiser as to the nature and fate of the creature in question.

Although she'd asked Hankyo to look for the sansui, he wasn't likely to ferret out the creature in a city of this size in such a short space of time.

Koshou, Sekki, Suzu. All she had were those three names. *No more clues than these?* She asked Koshou's neighbors about his whereabouts, but nobody would answer her questions. Clearly, most if not all of them were hiding the truth from her.

She talked to many people, asking about Koshou, and couldn't but become aware of the despondent expressions on their faces. A child had died in this city. Its citizens had watched the carriage drive away, pretending that nothing had happened.

She saw that same mind set everywhere she went. *What are you looking for him for?* she was asked over and over. Even when she explained about the attack on the rike, she was told, "Well, that's too bad," and with those words of consolation, they crossed the street to get away from her.

No consciences were stirred, and no one showed the slightest inclination in helping her. Far from it, the only attention she received was from those warning her to lay off.

What has happened to this city? she thought, passing through the gate of an inn. "Excuse me," she said, and proceeded to ask if anybody there knew a man named Koshou, or if Suzu or Sekki had stayed here before. It stood to reason that a fellow innkeeper might know. Having moved, though, Koshou could be lodging anywhere. But she had no good grounds on which to proceed. She was equally aware of the possibility that he might have simply left town.

"Don't know," the innkeeper bluntly replied.

"Is that so? Thanks, anyway."

She stepped outside and lingered for a while in front of the establishment. While she'd been talking with the innkeeper, Hankyo had surreptitiously checked inside for any you-beasts quartered there.

"None," came the faint whisper when he returned.

Youko nodded to herself. She had started for the next inn along the way when a voice called out behind her. "You looking for somebody?"

When she turned around, a man was coming out from the inn after her. At a glance, he struck her as anything but an upstanding member of society.

"That's right. Do you know a man named Koshou?"

"Koshou, eh?" The man motioned her toward an alleyway next to the inn. Without a word, Youko followed him.

"So what's this Koshou to you, anyway?"

"The rike in Kokei was attacked. I'm looking for some connection between him and the criminals who did it. If you know anything, tell me."

The man leaned against the wall. "You got any evidence for what you're talking about?"

"No evidence. That's why I'm looking for him."

"Huh," the man said. His eyes fell to Youko's waist. "Some sword you got there. You know how to use that thing?"

"It's for my own protection."

"Really." The man straightened himself. "Can't say I know a thing about anybody named Koshou. But if this Koshou was some kind of criminal, you don't expect that he'd still be hanging around here, do you? He would have flown to coop long ago."

Youko looked up at the man's face. *He knows something*, she thought to herself. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"I usually am. You can't go chasing around after people without any evidence. It could be this Koshou's no criminal at all."

The man scratched at the back of his neck. Her eyes fell on his rough hands and her attention focusing to a point.

"While you're traipsing around asking questions like this, you're bound to run into some real villains. Could get dangerous, don't you think?"

A ring. A ring that didn't match up with the man's overall appearance.

"Don't go looking for trouble. Leave that to the authorities."

Youko remembered. Koshou wore a ring just like that one. And so did the kid who'd stopped him from roughing her up. And the girl, Suzu, who'd served her tea.

"Shouldn't go around wasting folks' time like this," he said with a flippant wave of the hand.

He turned on his heels. Youko strode toward him. He glanced back at her suspiciously. She caught him by the shoulder and spun him around.

"You—"

Grabbing him by the collar, she slammed him into the wall, pressing her shoulder against his back. The man bellowed. She laid the tip of the blade against his neck. "Would you like to find out whether or not I can use this sword?"

"—*bitch.*"

"Where did you get that ring?"

The man squirmed and pushed her away. She firmed her hold on the sword. The tip sank a few millimeters into his flesh. "Quit moving unless you want get hurt a lot worse."

The man's head nodded forward and he caught his breath, sending a shiver down the length of the sword. A slash of red appeared from a section of the streaked, stained wall above his head. The forefoot of a beast grew out of the wall, extending its claws atop the man's head. His cheek pressed against the brick, the man grasped something of what was happening and cast her a beseeching, sideways glance.

"You know who Koshou is?"

“I don’t.”

“You’re lying. Look, my arm’s getting tired. You’d better have something to say before my hand starts to shake too much.”

“I don’t know!”

“All I want is to sit down and talk. The way you’re holding out makes me think that both of you are criminals.”

“You’ve taken leave of your senses!”

“Now you’re just pissing me off. Talk.”

A moment passed.

“Koshou isn’t that kind of man.”

“And if we can sit down and talk about it, then hopefully I’ll agree with you.”

“You’re wrong. Believe me.”

“Take me to his place. Then I’ll have reason to.”

“Okay, okay,” the man groaned.

At the same time, the forefoot of the beast vanished. Youko drew back the tip of the sword. Sensing no resistance from him, she released her hold.

The man placed his hands on the wall and shook his head. With the hand bearing the ring, he wiped the back of his neck, looked at his palm, and grimaced. “You would go this far? You’re crazy, woman.”

“And you’d better keep your promise. Try anything funny and next time this sword will cut you for good.”

Chapter 63

[16-4] The man led Youko to a block in the southwest quadrant of the city, to a row of inns that had long since gone to the dogs. The green paint had mostly peeled off the faded, soot-stained walls. This turquoise color was rare, specially reserved for buildings used as brothels.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Don't get snooty," the man replied. "You'll understand once you meet Koshou. That's why I brought you here. Don't start distrusting me now."

They entered the brothel. Immediately inside the brothel was a small dining hall. Hardly anybody was there. An old man hurried out to meet them. Following behind her guide, Youko stood with her back to the door and watched as he and the old man exchanged a few words.

The man retreated into the back room. Soon, in his place, emerged the man she'd met before.

"You again."

"And you're Koshou?"

The man nodded. He gestured toward the dining hall with his chin. "Have a seat. But a meal costs even more than it did before."

"I came here to ask you a few questions."

"So sit. I've got no reason to cross swords with you."

Youko hesitated, spotting two or three other men poking their heads out from the back room. But not sensing in the least any impending assault, she nodded and took a seat.

"You were in Hokui."

Koshou sat down opposite her. "I was. As I recall, I was leaving the house of an associate of mine."

"You didn't say so before."

"I've got reasons of my own for holding my tongue. I'm telling you now, so give me a break."

"For quite some time, a suspicious character has been coming by the rike. The man who led him there was Rou."

"The rike?" Koshou asked, disbelievingly. Her guide and the old man were also at a loss for words.

"The rike in Kokei. I've been staying there."

"Whatever the case, Rou is an intermediary. It's rare for him to extend his services to people but not so rare for him to be around running errands. Rou and I go way back. I guess you didn't know that."

"Before the rike was attacked, some men seemed to be checking the place out. They returned to Takuhou."

"Attacked? The rike in Kokei was attacked?"

Youko nodded. Koshou was so truly astonished that she almost shook her head in wonder.

Koshou glanced back over his shoulder. "Somebody go get Suzu!"

"Youshi—"

Suzu's eyes opened wide when she saw Youko sitting there. Before Youko could speak, Koshou said, "Suzu, when you were in Houkaku didn't you hear talk about somebody getting kidnapped?"

Suzu nodded. "There was talk about a rike in Eishuu being attacked and the superintendent kidnapped."

"What was the city? And the name of the superintendent who was kidnapped?"

"I didn't get the name of the city. As for the man's name . . . I know it was mentioned, but I can't recall."

"Enho," Youko interjected.

Suzu nodded forcefully. "Yes, that's right. It was Enho."

Koshou turned back to Youko. "Enho was kidnapped? Really?"

“Do you know him? Enho?”

“My little brother has attended his lectures on occasion. I went with him once. To be sure, it was Rou who made the introductions. Enho is a renown scholar. I wanted him to meet my brother.”

“Brother—oh, the boy I met before? Fourteen or so?”

“That’s right, Sekki. You really don’t know where Enho is? Was anybody at the rike injured?”

Youko took a breath. Koshou truly looked as if this had all hit him from out of blue. That being the case, the trail for the real criminals had again run cold. “A girl was murdered.”

“That would have been Rangyoku?”

Youko nodded. “Shady types had been hanging around the rike. Everything I knew pointed to you. To make matters worse, after the rike was attacked, you packed up and left.”

Koshou smiled at the irony. “We had things on our hands as well. Not something to make a big deal about, but people snooping around puts us on edge. There was this suspicious character who came around twice. We didn’t like the way the wind was blowing, and pulled up stakes.”

“Where did you go?”

“Not far off. That was the same day the rike was attacked?”

Youko nodded. “Sometime between noon and sundown. Probably about the same time I was talking with Suzu or just after.”

“I was in the inn the same time you were. I returned when you were talking to Suzu.”

“Eh?” Youko said, looking at him.

“You were talking about the marquis of Baku. You seemed awful suspicious to me. I spied on you from the kitchen.” He spoke with the same wry smile.

“It was Shoukou,” Suzu said in a low voice. Youko turned to her. “That day, after the gates of Takuhou closed, a wagon returned to the city and the gates

were opened again to let it in.”

“I see,” she heard a small voice behind her say. She glanced back over her shoulder. Sekki was standing there.

“You—”

“Have you thought about why Enho would be targeted?”

“No,” Youko answered honestly.

“What kind of person is Enho?”

“I know that he was originally a citizen of Baku. That’s all.”

Sekki nodded. “He was connected with the Evergreen Seminary in Baku Province. He wasn’t an instructor, though I’ve heard that he consulted with people in a similar capacity as that of a teacher. Beyond that, I don’t know much more.”

“The Evergreen Seminary?”

“In the middle of the city in San County. A highly respected private school dedicated to the teaching of the Way. Last year it was raided by arsonists. The school was destroyed and all the instructors killed, but a number of people managed to survive. Rou has mentioned that he was attending the Evergreen Seminary, so I’m sure he has some connections to it.”

“So all these people who came to visit Enho—”

“Most likely, yes. Rou earnestly asked that this not be divulged. Even today, people connected to the Evergreen Seminary are being hunted down.”

“Hunted down? Why?”

Sekki answered plainly. “Because it’s a thorn in the side of those who have fallen from the Way following after their own selfish desires.”

“Men like that—”

“Men like that can’t abide people knowing about the Way. They can’t abide it when they take up the reins of government. You see, if they don’t surround themselves with people like them, who claim not to give a damn about Virtue or the Way, they’ll be deposed sooner or later.”

“But—”

“I’ve heard that the province lord of Baku attended the Evergreen Seminary as well. Because they found his existence so intolerable, they plotted to unseat him. Those who followed the pretender on one side and the marquis—who opposed her—on the other. If he turned out to be right, then all those who followed her would lose their place of power. So they whispered half-truths in the ear of the empress and entrapped the marquis. That’s the kind of people we’re dealing with.”

“Indeed,” Youko said, placing a hand on her forehead.

“According to Rou, the attack on the Evergreen Seminary came at the instigation of the vice-minister in the Shisui Prefecture Ministry of Summer.”

“What?”

“We asked for further details but nobody would talk, so we only heard this second-hand. The criminals who attacked and burned the Evergreen Seminary were said to be itinerants, coiled snakes that crawled out of Takuhou. Right after the attack, the current vice-minister, a mere itinerant at the time, was promoted to the ministry. That’s some promotion. The criminals and the vice-minister were surely acquaintances.”

“Shoukou, you mean.”

Sekki nodded. “The vice-minister was pulling the strings behind the scenes. The mastermind was surely Shoukou. I have no idea why Shoukou should so despise a seminary in Baku Province. But if he knew that survivors from the seminary were in Hokui, he’d make every effort to finish them off. That’s the kind of man he is.”

Youko looked at the face of the boy who was relating all this so calmly. “So Enho is perhaps in Takuhou?”

“The possibility is high. Whether alive or dead, I can’t say.”

Youko jumped to her feet.

“Hey, where you going?

She stopped at the sound of Koshou’s voice. “I’m going to rescue him.”

“Don’t talk nonsense!”

“I have to!” She owned him that debt of moral obligation and respect. Rangyoku was dead and Keikei lay at death’s door. But she could save Enho.

“Stop!”

Koshou grabbed her by the arm. She jerked herself free. Sekki stood in front of her and blocked the way. She took him by the shoulders and pushed him to the side.

“Youshi! Wait!” Suzu’s shrill voice froze her in her tracks. “Shoukou has dozens of guards at his beck and call. His carriage entered Takuhou but do you have any idea where he went? Or the many places Shoukou could be imprisoning his detractors? Don’t leap before you look.”

“But—” Youko started to say, when Koshou again took a hold of her arm.

“We have associates constantly keeping an eye on Shoukou. I think they’ll know where that troublesome carriage ended up.”

“Associates?”

“We’ve been on his trail for three years. There’s not a day that goes by when we don’t know what the bastard’s been up to.”

“Koshou—you—” Youko scanned the faces of men in the dining hall, whose numbers had at some point swelled to a dozen or more. “You are—?”

If she’d thought it through, this was the conclusion she should have come to. There was no way Suzu’s malice toward Shoukou would have abated in the least.

Koshou lightly clapped Youko on the back. “You’re packing a helluva weapon there but can it cut a wizard? Or should I ask, can *you* wield a sword that will cut a wizard?”

Youko smiled thinly. “To the bone.”

Koshou sent off a messenger, who returned past midnight. Koshou looked at the people assembled in the main hall. “The carriage entered the prefectoral palace. As you all know, Shoukou hasn’t left his official residence at the palace lately.”

Youko glanced at the nodding faces. *The faces of those willing and able to do what I cannot.*

"We don't know why he brought Enho back to the prefectural palace. But that's how the man operates. He's definitely up to no good. If Enho still lives, then I want to rescue him."

The silence filled with a powerful feeling of mutual consent.

"In any case, I don't intend to wait much longer to get things rolling. That could mean tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow." Having spoken his mind, Koshou surveyed the crowd gathered in the main hall. "What say you?"

His question was answered with a shout of approval.

"Good!" Koshou said with a nod. "We have bided our time for three years. The moment has come to bring an end to Shoukou's rule!"

Part XVII

Chapter 64

[17-1] In the second year of Sekiraku, according to the calendar of the Kingdom of Kei, during the early dawn hours on the first day of February, one of the official residences of Shoukou, the governor of Shisui Prefecture, was attacked.

The assailants, comprising some twenty citizens of Shisui Prefecture, shot fire arrows from the surrounding streets, scaled the walls, and fought their way into the inner sanctum. Yet the person of Shoukou was not found within.

After crossing swords with the residential guards, the assailants scrawled the characters *Shu On* on the walls. As soon as the city gates opened, they broke through the Horse Gate and fled. Pursued by provincials guardsmen, at least half their number slipped free and escaped to Ei Province.

Shoukou's full name was Seki On. Shoukou read the characters *Shu On* ("a special gift") as *Chuu On* ("the gift of execution"), expressing a desire for his assassination. In his indignation, he sent two hundred of his troops after the assailants and ordered five hundred more mustered from the surrounding territories to stand guard at the prefectoral palace.

Just before these troops were scheduled to arrive at Takuhou, on the night of the first attack on the governor's residence, the granary in the center of the palace compound was attacked. Moments before the arrival of the guards assigned to Shoukou's personal protection detail and the provincial garrison at Takuhou, the assailants set fire to the granary and fled.

The fires were extinguished before the structure was consumed, yet the assailants again left behind the characters *Shu On* and absconded to Ei Province. This time, approximately thirty individuals broke through the Horse Gate, half their number escaping capture and crossing the provincial border into Ei.

Clearly rogue elements were attempting to foment a rebellion. Suspecting

another attack on the granary in the works, Shoukou assigned provincial guardsmen along with his praetorian guard to cordon off the granary. Three hundred praetorians were further dispatched to watch the roads and the borders. However, two days later, no assault had come. Early in the morning of the third day, Shoukou having let down his guard if only in the slightest, the attack came at his countryside estate east of Takuhou.

The assailants numbered a hundred. When the provincial guardsmen and praetorians stationed at the granary arrived at the estate, the forces inside and outside the estate fought to a standstill.

"I wonder if they're okay."

At the window of the brothel, Suzu looked in the direction of the Hare Gate. In the midst of the chaotic city, dusk was already falling.

"They'll be okay as long as they've got Youshi," Koshou reassured her. He didn't offer any reasons and Suzu took an uncertain breath. Koshou said, "I offered two hundred men and Youshi said she could get the job done with a hundred. I'd say the odds are on their side."

Youshi had promised if they could capture Shoukou without killing him, she'd make it happen with a hundred.

"You need to be concerned for yourself, Suzu," Sekki said, as he strung a bow.

"I'll be okay," she'd replied. "After all, nobody can handle the sansui without me around."

"I'll leave Sekki to your care," Koshou said.

She nodded. "But what about you, Sekki? Can you draw a bow like that?"

"No problem. I don't have the best aim, but I'm not totally useless." He laughed nervously. "Do you know how they settle things when two kids applying to school come out the same in grades, character, and relative merits?"

"I don't. An archery contest, perhaps?"

"That's right. The best shot wins. So I did a lot of practicing."

"I see."

Sekki wanted to become a government official. If he wished to make anything of himself in this kingdom that was his first step. Sekki had the brains to succeed. In fact, he had an almost uncanny ability to read things right.

First, we send out twenty to get Shoukou all riled up.

These twenty set fire to Shoukou's official residence on the inner loop road. Then they hightailed it out of there. The next time, thirty struck the granary.

The granary stored grain against times of famine. Setting it alight was a bold gesture on Sekki's part. "Our actual intent is not to burn it down," he explained. "And if by chance it should be consumed, Shoukou never had any intent on distributing it to the people anyway."

But by doing so, Shoukou would have to post guards. And when the attackers fled, they would chase after them in a rage. Shoukou would recall the constabulary from the surrounding districts and harden defenses around the palace.

That's what Sekki predicted and that's exactly what happened.

"Next, we raid his countryside estate with two hundred men, who will barricade themselves inside the walls. Eventually the provincial guard will be called in."

Based on the precedents established by the previous two incidents, Shoukou would dispatch his praetorian guard to where Wa bordered Ei Province. As the previous attackers had numbered twenty and thirty respectively, when two hundred rebels showed up in force, he would conclude this must be their entire contingent. The inflamed Shoukou would redeploy his forces from the palace perimeter to his personal manse.

And in fact, two battalions of provincial guardsmen and half as many praetorians surrounded the estate, with another battalion manning the blockades along the highways. Left in Takuhou were five hundred constables and five hundred of Shoukou's personal security detail. Of them, in the afternoon, half were ordered to the estate and those remaining were dispersed to stand watch in the city, guard the prefectural palace, and protect the granary.

Koshou raised his sword and then lightly planted the tip in the earth. The long

blade glimmered. “There should be two hundred or so fools left in the palace.” Suzu turned to him when he spoke. “Watch out for the crossbows. With your back against the sky you’ll stand out like a sore thumb.”

Suzu grasped her short sword and nodded. They and their more than eight hundred compatriots assaulting the palace had no good way to guard their rear.

“We’ll see you later, I guess?”

Outside the window, the dusk was falling. The few left behind watched Suzu and her party leave the brothel. They and a few dozen others scattered throughout the city still had things to do that needed to get done.

“It’s getting dark.”

Youko wiped the falling dew from the blade and looked at the sky beyond the tower gates. Like Shoukou’s own elevated pride, the ramparts surrounding his estate were surprisingly high. He was apparently possessed of the conviction that not even the treetops in his carefully groomed arbor should be seen by the hoi polloi.

Of the hundred-odd armed farmers and citizen-soldiers with her, the majority of them were still in fine fettle. They were well protected by the bulwarks and watchtowers that Shoukou himself had built.

“The sun is down,” Youko said. “They’ll be coming over the walls.” A man arming his crossbow next to her nodded. She said, “Retreat toward the main hall, link up with them there, and then regroup.”

The man warily slid his gaze across the perimeter, and started back toward the main hall. The others followed after him in twos and threes.

Bringing up the rear, Youko said as if to herself, “Hankyo—”

Yes, came the whisper of his voice.

“After this, I’ll leave the rest up to the shirei.” She’d borrowed from Keiki every shirei he could spare.

“You should escape to the Imperial Palace and muster the Imperial Army.”

“Do you think what Keiki could not achieve I would be able to accomplish?”

Dismiss Shoukou, she had demanded of him. Or else mobilize the Ei provincial guard. Neither request had been honored. The ministers wanted details about *why* she wanted to dismiss Shoukou. A letter dispatched with Hankyo, carrying the Imperial Seal, proved similarly useless. Ultimately, her request to mobilize the Ei provincial guard was refused.

“Prepare for the worst. We only have ourselves to rely on. Fly with the night and reduce the opposing forces as much as possible.”

“Is this your desire, Empress?”

Youko replied with a bitter smile. “You have my permission.”

Chapter 65

[17-2] The provincial palace had four gates. Of the four, the main or southern gate was also called the Phoenix Gate. The sentries at the Phoenix Gate suddenly found themselves confronted by several hundred citizens of Takuhou. Horrified, they watched as this mass of humanity flooded across the drawbridge toward them, brandishing weapons. The sentries frantically began to close the palace gates, which had been left open that night to allow ministers and soldiers free passage in and out of the palace grounds.

The mounted knight leading the mob reached the gate before it closed and swiftly dispatched the sentries. The gates were opened wide, and the armed civilians rushed the lookouts above the gate.

Archers posted at the merlons found themselves hamstrung by the sheer height and excessive ornamentation of the parapet walls, all built as a sop to Shoukou's vanity. The main gates were at least thirty meters high. Already, because of the height of gates and the failing light, it was impossible to discriminate friend from foe in the shadows. Moreover, turrets that should have afforded a clear lookout constituted little more than architectural embellishments, and faced the outside of the gate with severely compromised fields of view.

At any rate, blindly firing their crossbows, they had no idea whether they were hitting anything or not. As it took time to rearm the crossbows, they were overrun before they could get off three arrows each. Seconds later, they had no choice but to surrender. Not surprisingly, the warning fires were extinguished without an acknowledged reply, as if the posted sentry had stepped out to take care of business and didn't bother returning.

A contingent of palace guards ran along the wall walks, stampeding into the palace. Praetorians scattered here and there tried to raise the alarm. Most of them were cut down by the arrows and fell futilely in the dust.

The temporarily opened gates swallowed up the citizens of Takuhou and then closed.

“Lower the portcullis!”

Accompanying the cry, the block and tackle at the base of the watchtower began to move. The thick, single panel inside the gates noisily descended toward the tracks in the roadway under the gate. Suzu watched from the dark tunnel closed off by the gate to make sure the portcullis fell squarely into place in the channels, and then caught up with the crowd already running to middle gate that closed off the inner court.

They had only crossed a short distance when the middle gate was closed and the sound of the descending portcullis rang out. The palace guards inside shut the gate with their own self-defense in mind. Normally, inner court gates were simply constructed. The walls surrounding the inner court were as well only a taller, thicker variety of the walls that surrounded a typical domicile. Connected in a single span to the main palace walls, the appearance of the inner gate, which lacked the typical main and auxiliary entrances, again put Shoukou’s aesthetic tastes on full display.

“Suzu!”

Suzu looked back at the sound of Koshou’s voice. She reached and Koshou grasped her hand. As soon as he vaulted onto the back of the sansui, Suzu barked out a command to the bucking sansui and it launched itself into the air.

The sansui easily scaled the walls. Koshou jumped off before its feet touched the wall walk. Suzu swung the sansui around and set it down outside the gate. She made five trips carrying men over the wall. On the sixth, a cry of exultation arose from the gate turrets.

“Good job!” shouted Koshou, and turned to the sixth man alighting from the sansui. “Open the inner gate! Suzu, direct everybody to the inner court!”

“Yes, sir!”

The gate was opening inwards by the time the sansui returned to the threshold of the gate. She saw the portcullis in front of the gates raising up, and further beyond a clutch of constables on the run.

“Sekki! Climb on!” Suzu urged him from astride the sansui.

Sekki bent his bow and let an arrow fly in the direction of the middle gate.

Then he nodded and ran over to her. Suzu reached out her hand. He wrapped his hand around hers and she pulled him onto the sansui's back. The sansui neighed with obvious irritation. Suzu patted his neck to calm it down. "That's a good boy, that's a good boy. Don't be so disagreeable. Sekki, are you all right?"

"I'm okay," came his voice behind her. "Suzu, when I give you the signal, lean forward in the saddle. I don't want to hit you when I fire the bow."

"Got it." Suzu spurred on the sansui. When they passed through the gate, Koshou raised himself to his full height and thrust his broadsword into the air. "If all our number are here, then close the gates! To Shoukou's quarters!"

The answering cries shook the ground.

The rebels ran along the wall walks, weapons raised, breaking down the doors of the turrets and guardrooms along the way.

Confident that their comrades occupying the ramparts had their backs, they overwhelmed the onrushing praetorians. The men accompanying Suzu charged into the depths of the prefectoral offices. In the innermost heart of the palace they found themselves facing Shoukou's official palace residence.

Every time Sekki said to jump, Suzu nimbly launched the sansui into the air. From the elevated vantage point, they could take in the full extent of the panic gripping the compound. People rushing in and people running for their lives, all crashing about in extreme disarray. The overwhelming majority comprised those fleeing the scene. Sekki pointed out that they likely anticipated the arrival of the provincial guardsmen and praetorians currently racing toward the city.

"Will they really come?"

"For sure. But with our allies manning the ramparts and guarding the gates, it will take them some time. If we can capture Shoukou before then, they may well lose the will to carry on the fight." Sekki yelled at the top of his lungs, "Suzu!"

Suzu glanced ahead of the sansui's landing area and caught her breath. Two sentries wielding battle axes awaited them. The sansui couldn't launch itself again without touching ground, and there wasn't time to turn aside.

The blades flashed at the sansui.

She instinctively shut her eyes, barely managing to swallow the scream that came to her lips. The sansui bellowed. The next sound was the heavy thud of the collision. They hit the ground. The sansui's descent came to a halt.

"Youshi!"

At the sound of Sekki's voice, Suzu opened her eyes. The two sentries lay sprawled before them.

"You saved us!"

"I only took out one of them," said Youshi. "Your sansui kicked the other one into next week. That's one smart animal."

"And the estate?" There was not the slightest hint of relief in Sekki's voice.

"They're hanging in there. They were doing such a good job holding the fort, I left things in their hands for the time being."

"Holding the fort—"

In contrast to Sekki's tone of voice, Youshi's was rather cheerful. "I'd estimate that we've reduced the troop strength of those heading our way by at least half."

The two battalions (1000 soldiers) and five hundred praetorians surrounding Shoukou's country estate were in complete disarray. Despite all the watch fires lit, places still remained in darkness. And in that darkness, something moved.

The enemy barricaded inside the main hall of the estate in front of them was not the problem.

Screams burst forth from the darkness. When they ran to see, they found their fallen comrades wailing pitifully, deep wounds in their limbs—wounds that had been inflicted by no moral weapon but resembled the teeth and claw marks left by beasts. Yet they caught no sight of whatever creature had caused them.

All they knew was that something was *out* there and there were *many* of them. Fear seized them until they quailed at the sound of their own footsteps.

They began to retreat in ones and twos. When the arrows ceased to fly, they realized that they were now too far from the main hall for a bow to reach. The order had not come to withdraw but no soldier had any desire to hold that

ground. They whimpered and cried like children. Accustomed to preying on the weak, they had no experience going against an enemy whose fear of them was so much less than their own fear of the darkness.

“The prefectoral palace is under attack!”

At the height of the tension, the word raced through the rank and file. Profound feelings of relief gripped all the soldiers equally. The battalion commanders were no exception.

“What is going on!”

“Hundreds of armed civilians have stormed the palace!”

Thin smiles showed on the faces of the battalion commanders as they conversed together: “We’re walking into a trap here. We’d better go back.” They shouted in voices that might have sounded a tad too enthusiastic, “Return to the palace!!”

Like a dam breaking, the soldiers stamped toward the Hare Gate. The number of troops abandoning their positions and pouring like a tidal wave through the gate were at least half of their original strength.

Left behind where they had fallen in the darkened countryside, the cries of the wounded called out for rescue.

Chapter 66

[17-3] With Koshou flanking her, Youko advanced on the keep of the provincial palace.

Every now and then, they'd cross swords with a palace guard or sentry barreling around a corner, shrieking bloody murder. Youko glanced at Koshou. Koshou wielded his broadsword in a furious manner. The blade of the sword was tipped with a thick, barbed fluke instead of a regular spear point. The weapon itself must weigh more than a hundred pounds. His ability to keep knocking the enemy about with it was a feat worthy of admiration.

By simply swinging the broadsword at a charging enemy, its hundred-plus pound mass alone would shatter his opponent's bones. The sheer force generated when he flung the sword out to the side flattened armor like a swatted fly. In that manner he warded off any attackers who came at them from the rear.

Every swing of Koshou's sword was met with a ghastly shriek in return.

"Incredible," Youko muttered to herself.

Koshou laughed and glanced over his shoulder. "You're no ordinary person yourself."

"I'm not doing anything so extraordinary."

"Then how'd a pretty young thing like you get used to so much death?" As they ran down a hallway, Koshou's breathing told her he was close behind.

"Long story," Youko replied with a thin smile. *I fought the pretender's army.* And fighting meant killing. If she had faltered then, her supporters would have died. She couldn't very well have hidden behind the backs of those protecting her, fearing soiling her own hands with blood.

A throne is a thing purchased with blood. That is what the Imperial En told her. Even if she'd received the throne from Heaven without shedding a drop, it would have been impossible to hold onto it without the rivers flowing red. The pretender's army would still have to be vanquished, internal rebellion crushed,

criminals executed.

It was better not to be a coward.

“Youshi!” came Suzu’s cry, as the sansui soared over the roof and landed in the courtyard.

Youko sensed murderous intent to her right and crouched down. She heard the sound of enemy armor and a slashing attack whistled over her head. She answered in the same direction, reaching out to parry and thrust in return. Against this weapon—that could pierce the toughest youma—the armor was so much tissue paper. The sword bisected the enemy like a hot knife through butter. She yanked it out and whipped it around, flinging the gore off the blade. Not a drop adhered to the shining steel.

“That sword is some piece of work,” Koshou said with a grim smile.

At the back of her thoughts, Youko heard a voiceless whisper. *Hankyo*— She didn’t have to ask if he’d returned. *Go!* she told him. *Get to where Shoukou is and cull the enemy’s forces.*

There was no reply but Youko knew that her orders had been delivered.

When Suzu’s squad arrived at the palace keep, the grounds before the governor’s residence were awash with blood. Suzu reflexively brought her hand to her mouth.

Koshou raced up behind her. “How did this happen?”

“Our allies must have gotten here first,” was Youko’s quick explanation, as she jumped over the corpses. She was breathing hard but her steps were steady.

“Huh—” said Koshou, with a befuddled expression, casting a puzzled glance at the corpses. He planted himself beside the door. The voices of the men bringing up the rear fell to a hush.

Koshou delivered a single blow with the broadsword. The thick wood splintered. The rest of the assault group piled on, and a second and then third attack rent it in two. The tip of Koshou’s sword still embedded in the wood, door collapsed inward.

The building appeared empty, quiet as death. There was no sign of any human

presence. Bodies were strewn across the floor as if cut down in the middle of a conversation. They opened doors here and there, checking every nook and cranny and then ran toward the inner sanctum. At the very heart, across from the open door, the figure of a man huddled in the corner of the room.

The people entering the room momentarily froze in place.

Suzu dismounted from the sansui was following hard on Youko's heels. She also stopped in her tracks.

The man crouched down and tried to crawl under the divan in the gorgeously arrayed room. Despite the blanket pulled over his head, the mound of cloth could be clearly seen for what it was. And as the mound itself was the size of the divan, how he'd fit under the divan was anybody's guess. Even a child knew better than to leave his nose poking out from the folds. The round lumpy mound trembled.

Koshou acted first. He approached the man and grabbed the blanket. A strangled scream reverberated from beneath the layers of cloth.

The scream came from a tremendously fat man, so how tremendously obese his age was difficult to discern. An eternity of gluttony had left him hardly a man but a strange species of living blubber.

Koshou tossed the blanket to the side. Half-buried in the mass of flesh, the small, animal-like, beady eyes looked up at Koshou, suffused with fear.

"Shoukou, I presume," Koshou stated flatly.

"No, no, no!" the man shrieked.

"Who else in Takuhou could be mistaken for the likes of you?"

People poured into the room, surrounded him. Among them was Suzu, who reached into her tunic, to where the sword rested against her racing heart. She firmly grasped the hilt.

This is Shoukou.

Her hand trembled. She drew the sword from its sheath.

The man who killed Seishuu.

“Suzu.”

Youhi spoke in a low voice. Suzu started, her eyes wide in surprise. When she looked over her shoulder, Youhi shook her head, no. She lightly patted Suzu on the arm and then pressed through the ring of people, who all stood there as if frozen in place.

“So you’re Shoukou.”

“No, I’m not!”

“What did you do with Enho?”

“Enho?”

“If you can deliver Enho alive, we may spare your life for the time being.”

The man’s little eyes nervously flitted back and forth.

“On the other hand, if you wish to die, I will be pleased to accommodate you.” She drew her sword. The man frantically backed away. He looked like a fat bear trying to scratch his back on the divan.

“Really? You’re really going to spare me?”

“You have my word.”

Youko looked up at Koshou. With a bewildered expression, he looked back and forth between Youko and Shoukou. He closed his eyes and sighed. “Now you’re making promises like that. He’s all yours then.”

Youko replied with a slight nod. She knelt down in front of Shoukou. “Out with it. Where’s Enho?”

“H-he’s n-not h-here.”

“What?”

The man raised a quavering hand, his stubby forefinger tracing a crooked circle in the air. “Meikaku. I know nothing. The marquis of Wa asked me to. So I sent him to Meikaku.”

“Gahou? Why would Gahou want to kidnap Enho?”

“I was told to kill him. Because he’s a survivor of the Evergreen Seminary.

That's what he said. I ordered the raid but didn't kill him. The fools brought him here. When I informed the marquis, he said to deliver Enho to him."

"So he is still alive?"

"I didn't kill him. Truly."

Youko glanced behind her, at the flustered and perplexed faces looking down at them. "I understand the malice in your hearts but please discipline yourselves for now. This man is tied to Gahou. If he is killed and Gahou escapes, all will be for naught."

His knowledge of the depraved lengths to which the Wa Province Lord had gone made Shoukou a vital link.

A man standing next to Koshou cast his eyes up toward the heavens and heaved a big sigh. Taking that as a signal, the room shook with jeers of derision. Some crying out in scorn, a few others quietly holding back tears of despair.

The room once again fell into silence and the human cordon around Shoukou dispersed. Dejected, shoulders drooping, they exited the room. Behind them, Koshou suddenly scraped the tip of his broadsword against the floor.

"The provincial guard is coming! This is no time to get complacent!"

At once, his crestfallen comrades were seized by the warrior spirit. After the requisite disrespectful glances at Shoukou, they snapped out of it, lifted their heads proudly, and marched out of the room.

Suzu continued to stare at Shoukou. He was nothing but a stupid, frightened man. Her malice for him was deep but that malice was hers alone. Not even Seishuu had shared it when he died. If Seishuu *had* spoken any words of revenge in his final moments, she would have killed Shoukou no matter what Youshi said.

"You killed a child in Takuhou."

Shoukou shuddered violently, like a wounded bird.

Suzu balled her hands into fists as she turned on her heels. "And I will never forget it."

Chapter 67

[17-4] The soldier arrived at a gallop in the middle of the night. After counting the dead hanging from the walls across the mote, he'd come to the conclusion that the palace defenders had given up the fight.

A nearby vassal looked up and said, "Meaning—"

Astride his horse, the battalion commander nodded. "Meaning the rebels have control of the keep."

The palace grounds were still as death. Rugged gates and thick walls guarded the prefectoral offices. When the provincial guard had arrived, the palace was already in controlled by the rebels. They would have no choice but to directly challenge these formidable defenses. Even if they broke through, what they had come to defend was likely no longer there.

"Tell them to cease fighting and pull back. Launching an offensive now would be meaningless."

"But the praetorians—"

The commander's gaze fell upon the praetorians, who were feverishly readying themselves for a charge upon the main gates. "Give them fair warning as well. In any case, the rebels will have already found their quarry. Say that I'm ordering them to cease engaging and withdraw because the person who would hold them responsible likely no longer draws breath."

He knew that the zeal of the praetorians had little to do with honor or loyalty but sprang forth from fear. If they pleased Shoukou, they won whatever rewards they could imagine. If they displeased him in the least, they would be dispatched without mercy. Those who served Shoukou knew this better than any.

"Retreat and regroup. Pitch camp at the West Gate. We'll rest until dawn and await reinforcements from Meikaku. The rebels may attempt to flee before then. Capture anyone who attempts to leave the palace. If they resist, do not hesitate to employ deadly force."

Most of the praetorians within the palace grounds had been killed or had given

up. Any remaining ministers had immediately surrendered. They were gathered together and locked inside the buildings. The remaining bodies of the praetorians were hung from the palace walls.

The provincial guard posted outside the palace walls pulled back and formed a battle line outside the West Gate. They settled in and awaited the dawn.

"Well, now what?"

Koshou looked east from the guard tower, surveying the scene before the Blue Dragon Gate. The guard towers were squat stone structures built at critical junctures along the parapets. The towers projected over the inner and outer portions of the palace wall, studded with merlons and crenels from which firing positions could be established, and thick doors and walls facing the wall walks to the left and right. Such a vantage point offered a clear view of the interior and exterior of the palace from which fire could be directed at the enemy. Closing the doors cut off access to the wall walks.

"If we don't move first," said Sekki, "we'll have no choice but to break through their lines and make a run for it." He peeked through a catapult crenel at the city beyond.

"Sure seems that way. Things are awful quiet around here."

The external environs of the palace seemed asleep. But no one was sleeping. Uneasy groups of people gathered here and there, returning to report after cautiously checking out the state of the prefectoral palace. That the rebels had control of the palace could be ascertained from the bodies hanging from the walls. But what would they do next?

"Well, what are we going to do next?" Youko asked Sekki.

Sekki shook his head. "Whatever we decide upon, we've got to act before dawn. Once it becomes light, we'll find ourselves at a distinctive disadvantage."

"Could we retreat with Shoukou as our hostage?"

"Shoukou does have some value as a hostage. Other than that, if the citizens of Takuhou don't rise to our defense, there's not much hope for us. One battalion of provincial guards and close to five hundred praetorians are guarding the border with Ei Province. If we can't create enough chaos in Takuhou to

entice them back here, we'll be left with no escape route. The provincial guards stationed at Meikaku are currently marching from the east."

"And to the north?" Ken Province could be reached by crossing the mountains to the north.

"Our only option there would be to reach the mountains in twos and threes and make our way to Ken. We know what's coming if we remain in Wa. Our only recourse is to flee to a neighboring province. Yet Gahou could put an end to that option by asking the province lord of Ken to mobilize his guard units. By the time we crossed the mountains, news of the rebellion would have preceded us, and the Ken provincial guard would be waiting for us."

"So it's Ei Province or nothing."

"Yeah," Sekki said with a nod. "The Taiho's duchy across the river remains our best bet." He looked hopefully out at the sleeping city.

A knock at a door and a small voice whispered, "The prefectoral palace has fallen."

Voces full of surprise echoed back and forth. Then silence.

The opportunity had come to liberate Takuhou, some argued strenuously. "How many people have been killed so far? If we don't act now and prove to the powers that be that we're no cowards, after Shoukou is gone we'll be saddled with another like him."

"The next governor may be worse than this one."

"Shoukou doesn't rule the kingdom. That's a lesson they need to learn."

"Yeah, they need to know that no beast will govern us, at least in Shisui."

The voices were cut off by the sound of a closing door. In ones and twos, downcast men gathered in the southwest corner of the city.

"How'd it go?"

"Not well. Nothing but cowards in this city."

"Nobody seemed happy even hearing that the palace had fallen. They still all have that constipated look on their faces."

"No matter what happens, they'll invent some reason to be afraid. It's soaked into their bones."

"Do they think if they make of themselves a small enough target, the arrows won't find them? That's how they plan to live out the rest of their lives?"

"So what do we do then?"

A hush fell upon the darkened streets as the whispers ceased.

"If it only comes down to us, we're going to help—"

"Somehow we've got to help make good their escape."

The night sky began to brighten.

"This is bad," a quiet voice said.

Suzu turned and looked at Sekki. They were standing on the wall walk next to the watchtower atop the gate. The darkness had already lifted enough to make out people's faces in the dim light.

Acknowledging Suzu's gaze, Sekki laughed nervously. "We can't afford to wait. Daybreak is coming."

A deathly still fell upon the wall walk. Koshou took a deep breath.

"After this, we'll never see Shisui again. It may not be much, but we brought down Shoukou a few pegs. No matter what, he's going to have to account for the chaos that occurred here. Let's just leave it at that."

Dejected sighs filled the air.

"What now, Sekki?"

"Distribute the minimum necessary provisions from the storehouse. Then head straight north into the mountains."

"Escape to Ken Province?"

"That's our only recourse. Honestly speaking, if we turn toward the west, in the time it will take us to engage the provincial guard waiting for us, the guard from Meikaku will have caught up with us."

"And south?"

"No good. The distance is too great. The cavalry would overtake us before we made it to a neighboring province. There's no way we can compete with soldiers on horseback. No, going north is our only option."

From the start, they had no defense against the airborne cavalry riding pegasi. The provincial guard had few air cavalry, Sekki said. They'd had no choice but to gamble that such a rare asset would be held back in reserve.

"We'll break through in the north, where no battalion commanders are stationed. It may not be much, but troop moral cannot be high."

Including the wounded, at least seven hundred had made it this far—more than any of them had expected. But Koshou and the rest of them could only count it as a defeat, the citizens of the city not having come to their aid. After this, they'd have no choice but to run for the hills.

Everybody seemed to understand this. Heavily armed men hung their heads in frustration.

"Well, then!" Koshou declared in a clear, loud voice. "So the citizens of Takuhou are nothing but cowards! Look around. That is how many are not. In short, we're the only people left in Shisui with real heart. And we had the gall to all gather here together!"

A ripple of laughter arose from the downcast crowds.

"We did it once and we can do it again! We'll make good our escape!" With this cry, Koshou rallied their assembled forces.

"He really is something," Suzu heard Youshi mutter to herself. When she turned to her, Youshi smiled. "A little speech like that and Koshou renews their fighting spirits. Incredible. He'd make a good general."

"I wonder."

"Indeed," Youshi laughed.

At that moment, Suzu heard the sound of wings overhead.

Chapter 68

[17-5] Suzu flung back her head. There in the gray sky above, she caught a glimpse of a dark shadow, the silhouette of great wings.

A bird.

“No, a pegasus!”

The crowds dissolved into panic.

“The air cavalry!”

“Sekki!” Koshou roared.

Suzu looked for Sekki. He was already bending his bow. The arrow flew into the sky and was swallowed up by the black shadow. A second later a spear shot down at him.

“Sekki!” They all shouted. Suzu was paralyzed with fear. Koshou and Youshi reached for him. Youshi gave him a shove and Koshou yanked him out of the way just in time. The spear planted itself in the wall walk where Sekki had been standing the moment before. The cries of relief and terror mingled together.

“To the guard tower!”

At the sound of Koshou’s voice, they rushed to the guard tower doors. Suzu grasped the reins of the sansui. A spear pierced its neck. Suzu screamed. The sansui toppled over, its weight dragging her along, the whiplash in the reins flinging her to the side. She drew painful breaths as Koshou grabbed her by the arms and hoisted her up. Another spear plunged into the ground at their feet.

“Yeah, those provincial guardsmen are in a different league,” Koshou grunted, pushing Suzu toward the closest guard tower. “Get in there! Look after Sekki!”

Nodding, Suzu stared at the heavens, overcome with feelings of hopelessness. The swarm of pegasi darted to and across the breaking dawn sky. She couldn’t tell how many. The spears and arrows fell like rain. The trueness of their aim made it clear they were the elite of the elite.

“You too, Koshou. Come on!” Suzu grabbed his arm.

They didn't have the weapons to shoot down the air cavalry. Arrows began to fly from the roof of the guard tower but there was otherwise no defense against an airborne enemy.

"I can't believe the air cavalry was mobilized!"

"Please, let's go in!"

Suzu shoved him with all her might toward the guard tower. As soon as they stepped inside the thick doors, she saw another flock of pegasi flitting through the air. She estimated fifteen. Just as one mounted knight was the equal of eight infantrymen, one air cavalryman was a match for twenty grunts.

Uttering a string of oaths, Koshou ducked into the guard tower. The empty room contained only the block and tackle mechanism for hoisting the portcullis. Koshou ran through the room and climbed the stairs, scrambling to the top floor of third level above the main gate.

"Suzu!"

Following on Koshou's heels, no sooner had Suzu reached the top floor but she found a crossbow pointed straight at her. Sekki quickly aimed it elsewhere and tossed her a bolt. "Arm it for me," he said.

Suzu nodded. She placed her foot in the stirrup at the nose of the crossbow and pulled up on the cord with all her might. Then she laid the bolt in the groove and handed it back to Sekki. She picked up a spent crossbow and similarly loaded a bolt and passed it to one of the soldiers firing through the crenels at the air cavalry.

Alongside them, men were shifting the platform of a crossbow-like catapult that faced the exterior of the gate. Following Koshou's shouted commands, another group of men raised shield walls to protect themselves from descending projectiles and crossfire.

The large main room of the guard tower was made of stone. No walls faced outside or inside the gate. Instead, the room was enclosed by a ring of columns that formed the merlons and crenels, leaving the room otherwise completely open along its two lengths. They took axes and hacked away at the architectural flourishes to widen the field of view for the archers, and then set up temporary

shield walls covering the gaping rectangular apertures that otherwise were protected only by the merlons and overhanging eaves. From between the gaps, the dark city of Takuhou spread out beneath their gaze. The sky was barely light enough to discern the outlines of the city.

They were not completely without hope. They'd figured out how to aim the large catapult. Even without hitting the target, its presence drove the air cavalry away from the guard tower. Now the cavalry repeatedly charged and pulled back.

"Damn and blast but they're fast!" Suzu heard Koshou cursing. He'd missed. With the shield walls in place, their exterior view was obstructed as well.

"We're out of bolts!"

The cry came from the men grouped around the catapult. The weapon didn't shoot ordinary arrows but projectiles as long and as heavy as spears, that could slam straight through a building. They'd exhausted their supply.

"We've still got crossbows. Use them and your longbows. You've got pikes, don't you?"

Someone shouted behind them, "Koshou!"

As they turned, the shield wall at the back of the guard tower blew inwards. Splinters of wood rained down around them. Outside the gaping hole was a pegasus, its coat the color of red copper.

"Don't let them board us!"

With the attack concentrated on their forward positions, they'd neglected the rear. If pressure were brought to bear here, it'd all be over. Once they could no longer lay down covering fire, the air cavalry would swoop down on them. Sekki was closest. He spun around and readied his bow. Youshi drew her sword and started running.

Two figures were astride the pegasus. One bore a spear. He jumped off the back of the pegasus, vaulted over the parapets, and somersaulted to the floor. Suzu focused her attention on the pegasus. It was a kitsuryou. She recognized the rider.

Suzu leapt forward. “Sekki! Youshi! Stop!” At the reins of the kitsuryou was a young woman. “It’s Shoukei!”

As if recognizing the sound of Suzu’s voice, the head of the kitsuryou turned back. The flowing mane glimmered red in the first rays of light from the east. Suzu ran toward the crenels.

Shoukei called out, “Hey! Suzu!”

Suzu glanced over her shoulder at Koshou. “They’re not our enemies! I met her at Rou’s place!”

Suzu sidled up to hole in the shield wall and peaked out. The beautiful striped horse sailed right up next to her. The rider leaned forward. “Suzu! Are you all right?”

“Shoukei! How did you get here?”

Shoukei held out her right hand and pointed straight ahead.

“What?”

Suzu leaned over the wall. Shoukei pointed east down the main boulevard, toward the Blue Dragon Gate where the provincial guard was bivouacked. Throngs of people were pouring off the street.

“That’s—”

Shoukei waved to her and then dropped down, weaving the kitsuryou in and out of the shadows between the buildings, flying north. Watching her leave, Suzu sensed someone standing at her side. She looked up. It was the man who had jumped off the back of the kitsuryou.

“You’re Suzu?”

“Yes. And you are?”

The man flashed her a charming smile. “I’m Kantai. I guess you could call me a colleague of Shoukei’s.”

Suzu looked eastward. “And they are?”

Koshou leaned out over the wall to see what she had seen. “Your comrades in arms?”

"They arrived before the main body of the provincial guard. Jolly well done, I say." Kantai laughed. "Five thousand strong."

Part XVIII

Chapter 69

[18-1] On the streets of Meikaku, the capital city of Wa Province, rumors abounded of strange goings-on in Takuhou in Shisui Prefecture. Having heard the same from her friends, after completing the shopping, Shoukei rushed home.

“Did you hear, Kantai?”

Standing in the center of an assembled group, Kantai nodded. “Yes. Takuhou. It appears that someone has been so audacious to set fire to Shoukou’s residence.” He grinned. “*Shu On* was a brilliant stroke. Our colleagues in Takuhou have got their game together.”

“I wonder if they’ll be okay.”

Kantai thought it over, saying neither yea nor nay. “The word is the assailants have already fled. They attacked the residence and then escaped Takuhou before the gates were opened. Half their number made it across the border into Ei Province. The man himself wasn’t at the palace compound.”

“Wasn’t he their objective, then?”

“That’s what makes it such a strange story. We have allies in Takuhou who have Shoukou in their sights. They’ve gone so far as to amass winter weapons, so I have to believe this is part of a greater plan of insurrection. Maybe those fled after missing their target.”

“Perhaps,” Shoukei nodded. She couldn’t believe the people who had collected those thirty winter weapons would have only gone so far and no further. “Maybe it’s a completely different group. Not our friends in Takuhou.”

“Hard to say,” Kantai agreed. “But if this *is* their work, Shoukou’s not going to just let it blow over.”

“Eh?”

“If nothing else, they’re not idiots.”

The next day, Shoukei was preparing breakfast when Kantai suddenly called out for everybody to gather in the main hall. There she saw that all the mercenaries had gathered, along with Saibou.

"What's going on?" she asked, and was told to wait until everybody else had arrived. After biding her time there for a while, the arrival of three "merchants" she didn't know was the signal for the doors to close.

Kantai got to his feet. "A messenger pigeon arrived this morning from Takuhou. Shortly before dawn, the palace granary was attacked. The granary was set alight and the attackers fled to Ei Province. They were from the same group who left the aforementioned *Shu On*."

A murmur of conversation ran through the room.

"Our colleagues in Takuhou know what they're doing. Their true intent is to sow discord."

"What kind of discord?" Shoukei queried in a quiet voice.

Kantai nodded. "The group that raided Shoukou's residence yesterday did not err in failing to seize Shoukou. Only twenty attacked the residence, made a big deal of leaving the characters *Shu On* behind, and fled to Ei Province. Both teams having escaped into Ei, Shoukou had to be getting incensed. This is not the kind of man who can deal with such a provocation with any sense of humor."

"Yes, I know, but—"

"Shoukou will surely order the garrisoned guardsmen and his praetorians to secure the border. They'll increase surveillance of the citizenry and will try to ferret out the rebels. The clear intent of the rebels is to disperse Shoukou's defenses."

Shoukei couldn't follow everything she was being told. She scanned the audience and found she wasn't alone.

"There are three battalions of 1500 men garrisoned at the prefectoral palace, one thousand praetorians, and five hundred archers. Three thousand soldiers. Without the matching troop strength necessary to win a head-on attack, the rebels are doing what I would do: rile up Shoukou, get him to dilute his troop strength, and reduce the force presence at the prefectoral palace as much as

possible. I don't know how many have been sent to track down the brigands. In any case, enough soldiers must be garrisoned at the palace to secure it. Shoukou will no doubt be recalling troops deployed in neighboring counties."

"But won't that end up *increasing* troop strength?"

"It will take two or three days to recall the troops. That's when they must act. They'll spring another decoy outside Takuhou, enrage Shoukou, draw away more soldiers, and then rush the palace."

The room fell into a dead silence.

"Even if it hadn't come to my attention that our colleagues were amassing a stockpile of winter weapons, it'd strike me as a doable plan. But they have to raise an army before the praetorians return. They probably have no more than three days. To draw away the provincial guard, they're going to have to devote a convincing number to the decoy, who will have to stick it out just long enough. After that, they'll charge the palace with everything they've got left."

Shoukei caught her breath. How would Suzu fare? What role would she play? Would she remain unscathed? Would she come through it okay?

"However, they don't know the full story," said Kantai. Shoukei leaned forward and Kantai continued. "Shoukou and Gahou are joined at the hip. If Shoukou was a run-of-the-mill regional administrator, Gahou wouldn't lift a finger to help him. The arrival of the guard would be delayed and only a minor contingent would be dispatched. There'd be no reason to cover for an administrator the people found so disagreeable that they'd resort to violence. Yet knowing all this, Gahou will continue to succor Shoukou. In other words, Gahou's trained Shoukou like a pet to do his dirty work for him."

Kantai paused and then said, "In short, Shoukou knows where the bodies are buried. If the conflict stretches out without immediate resolution, the kingdom may get involved and things would get complicated. If, by chance, Shoukou is captured and placed in the dock, he won't go down quietly. Gahou is readying a large army. He'll stop at nothing to suppress this uprising. Our colleagues, who will have their arms full facing three thousand soldiers, haven't got a chance."

A stir of conversation filled the meeting hall.

"We shall ride to the support our Shu On brethren!" Kantai declared. "And while we're at it, we'll cause a little mischief of our own."

"What kind of mischief?" someone asked. Kantai flashed a guileless smile. "Well, to put down the Shu On Rebellion—as we shall call it—the provincial guard will take one or two days to reach Takuhou. Meikaku will empty out in the meantime. Why would we let this opportunity slip through our fingers?"

"Ahh—" went the murmur through the room.

Kantai beckoned to the three "merchants." He said, "I'm giving you the opportunity to remove the stigma from your names. Together with your followers, set forth to Takuhou. Be sure to arrive before the provincial guard."

The stigma? Shoukei puzzled, but the men answered in unison: "Yes!"

Kantai turned to Saibou, man seated in front of a display cabinet. "And how shall we proceed?"

Saibou thought it over for a moment. He looked at Kantai and said, "Leave Meikaku to me. You go to Takuhou."

Kantai smiled. "Cat's out of the bag, eh?"

"I know you have a fondness for hotheads like that bunch. Understand that I'm asking you to start a war. As soon as your men are provisioned, set forth for Takuhou. Our objective is not Gahou's assassination but to make the empress aware that something is rotten in Wa Province. Don't turn this into a do-or-die effort. Lose if you must. I'll figure something out afterward."

"Thank you!"

Shoukei raised her voice. "I want to go to Takuhou too."

"Oh?" Saibou looked at her.

"A friend of mine is in Takuhou, fighting alongside the Shu On rebels. Please allow me."

Saibou nodded. "Shoukei, you said your name was? Can you ride a pegasus?"

"I can."

"Then accompany Kantai. Go and assist those brave souls."

Shoukei bowed deeply. “I won’t disappoint you!”

Chapter 70

[18-2] “Just how many—!” exclaimed Koshou, as Shoukei explained how they had come to be here. She’d returned with the five thousand citizen soldiers, escorting them into the palace. Koshou finally got to ask his original question: “How many men do you have left in Meikaku?”

Shoukei looked at Kantai, and Kantai smiled mischievously. “Twice the number we sent here.”

The uproar momentarily filled the calm guard tower.

When the onslaught came from every direction in the brightening dawn, the few hundred remaining provincial guard encamped at the West Gate couldn’t surrender fast enough. Kantai’s irregulars whittled the air cavalry down to half their original number and forced them to withdraw. Suffused with the rays of the morning sun, the palace compound filled with ringing cheers. But this was not the end of things. The rest of provincial army was scheduled to arrive the day after tomorrow.

“Unfortunately, we’ve got to keep the provincial guard pinned down here for three days. Given three days, by the time the guard hears about the state of emergency in Meikaku and are ordered to return, the die will have already been cast.”

Koshou looked up at the ceiling and heaved a big sigh. “Step on a cockroach and there’s a hundred more where that one came from. I assume you’ve got mates aiming to take out Gahou.”

“What? No. We’ve got no plans to knock off Gahou and take over the provincial palace. We only hope to sully his image and tarnish his name. That you’d actually schemed to overrun a prefectoral palace was a huge surprise on our end.”

Koshou laughed loudly. “A feather in our caps, then. When guys like us lock our jaws on something, we don’t let go so easy.”

When Shoukei emerged onto the wall walk, Suzu and another girl were looking

down at the palace compound.

"It's a good thing you weren't wounded," Shoukei said.

Suzu glanced back over her shoulder. "Yeah," she said. With a shining countenance, she turned to the girl next to her. "Youshi, this is—"

Recognizing her, Shoukei burst out, "It's you!"

The girl reacted with equal surprise. Taken aback, Suzu said, "You already know each other?"

The girl nodded. Shoukei spoke up. "She saved my life in Meikaku. I didn't get a chance to thank you. I never imagined we would meet in such a place as this."

"No problem," the girl answered with a smile.

"Your name is Youshi? We didn't have time to introduce ourselves before."

"This is unbelievable," said Suzu. "Youshi, this is Shoukei."

Youshi flashed her a smile, as did Shoukei in return. They lined up on either side of Suzu, shoulder to shoulder, and gazed down at the foot of the wall walk.

"It's incredible, all these people," Suzu blurted out.

Shoukei grinned. "You didn't expect it?"

"Not in a million years. To be honest, I have to wonder if it's the best tack to take."

"Smooth sailing certainly doesn't await us. The provincial guard are on the march and headed our way. They'll get here tomorrow or the day after. Today's our one chance to take a breather."

"Yeah."

"At least you captured Shoukou."

Suzu nodded and turned to her neighbor. "Because Youshi said not to kill him. And the fact of the matter is, killing him would have felt good in the moment. But over the long haul it wouldn't have meant anything. As awful a man as he is, it'll be better if he stands in the dock for his crimes."

"You're right."

Suzu and Shoukei were silent for several minutes. The warm, springlike sunlight flooded the wall walk. The smell of blood and death was in the wind, but they had become inured to its scent.

Suzu said, “I can’t believe that we’re just hanging out like this.”

Shoukei agreed. “Really. The city feels so strange.”

The hustle and bustle inside the palace filled the air with a dull roar. Outside the walls, the city was silent. The main boulevard was devoid of people. The only time a person did appear was to cross the street, walking briskly to the other side as if to fetch something left behind.

Although the palace gates were closed and secured, people came and went in significant numbers. Despite this, none of the city’s denizens dared to come and check things out for themselves. Even individuals spotted crossing the boulevard far off in the distance acted as if they knew nothing and saw nothing.

“Everybody’s holding their breath, wondering what’s coming next.”

“Holding their breath?”

“Shoukou really was a monster. In one way or another, everybody was terrified of him. There’s not much humanity left in this city.”

“Meaning—?”

“The same time we were tracking down Shoukou, our agents fanned out throughout the city to rally support for our cause. But nobody answered the call. Even when the prefectoral palace fell before their very eyes, they wouldn’t get off their butts. They’re all convinced that if they even raise a finger, they’ll be found out and consequences will follow.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Still,” said Suzu, placing her hands on the merlon and straightening herself, “I have a pretty good idea where they’re coming from.”

“How’s that?”

“I worked at a manor house before I came to Kei. The mistress there made my life hell. When I think back about it now, I should have asked her why she was behaving the way she did. But show disrespect to Mistress Riyou-sama and she’d

tear you apart with her tongue and then work your fingers to the bone. So you shut up and lived with the fear and persevered, all the while getting more and more scared.”

“Huh.”

“She was always talking about the bad things that would happen if you did anything wrong. You’d get overcome with this sense of foreboding. When I sort it out in my mind, though, Mistress Riyousama wasn’t so cruel that she’d ever *deliberately* kill me—she didn’t even physically accost me—but I could never convince myself that she *wouldn’t*.”

Suzu turned her back to the city. “When you’re putting up with something, it’s coming to the end of your tether that scares you. No matter how hard things are *now*, you can only imagine how much worse your life will get if you give into your impulses and go flying off the handle.”

“I suppose that’s true—”

“But that doesn’t mean the times weren’t tough. Because my life was hard, I couldn’t stop thinking how unlucky I was and couldn’t stop feeling sorry for myself. The people shut up in their houses right now are in exactly the same state of mind. It would never occur to them to try and take down some big important person.”

An ironic smile came to Shoukei’s lips. “*Anybody who ends up dead probably had it coming.* That’s what they’re thinking. But when you understand that there are people like Shoukou in the world, then you know the murderers are the evil ones.”

“That’s true.”

“People treat unhappiness like a competition. Of course, the dead are the most unfortunate of all. But when you feel compelled to pity another person, it somehow makes you feel like the loser. Believing that *you’re* the most pitiable person on the face of the earth isn’t so different from believing you’re the most blessed. Feeling sorry for yourself and resenting all others, you run away from what you really should be doing.”

“Indeed.”

"When someone tells you you're wrong, you get all pissed off at them. You're angry because they dared criticize poor unlucky you."

Suzu giggled. "Exactly."

Shoukei looked at Youshi, who, eyes downcast, hadn't said a word so far.
"Sorry. We didn't mean to bug you with all this chit-chat."

"Not at all," Youshi said, not shifting her gaze. "I've been thinking about how we all managed to end up in the same place, in the same predicament."

"Yeah."

"Being happy is simple. It's the *getting* there that's hard to pull off. At least, that's the way it strikes me."

"You know," said Suzu, "when it comes to living a life, happiness is only the half of it. Suffering is the other half."

"I couldn't agree more," Shoukei said with a nod. "But all we see is the suffering. Little by little, we lose the ability to even recognize happiness when it's in our grasp."

"It's a matter of willpower. You know, this is a strange conversation we're having."

"Strange indeed."

Shoukei and Suzu ran out of things to say. The three of them lazily enjoyed the slight breeze.

"People are curious creatures," Suzu said absent-mindedly. As if snapping out of a daze, she lifted her head. "Hey, how about we do a patrol? Let's take a walk around the walls."

Chapter 71

[18-3] On such a carefree afternoon, it was hard to believe that there was a war going on.

"Starting tomorrow, people are going to start dying," Suzu blurted out as they strode along the wall walk.

"With so many sacrifices being made," Shoukei added, "news of this is bound to reach the ears of the Imperial Kei."

Youko stopped in her tracks. Shoukei glanced over her shoulder, a quizzical look on her face. "Ah," she said, a smile rising to her face. "You see, even if we attempted a *coup d'etat*, there's no guarantee that it would succeed. Kantai and the others aren't thinking about dispatching Gahou. If they could have their way, they'd like to know why their leader was punished by the Imperial Kei. If she takes notice then it's worth the cost."

Suzu nodded in agreement. "The empress can't have any idea what's going on in Wa Province and Shisui Prefecture. If she knew the chaotic state things were in, how much Shoukou and Gahou are despised, she'd surely spend a lot more time righting wrongs like this. That's what we're hoping for."

Suzu giggled to herself. "To tell the truth, I came to Kei to meet the empress. So did Shoukei."

Youko's eyes flew open wide. "To meet the Imperial Kei? Why?"

"Because she's the same age as us," Suzu and Shoukei said at the same time, and laughed.

"That's the only reason?"

"No, not really," Suzu quickly added. "It was also because we were both *kaikyaku*."

As they strolled along the wall walk, Suzu recounted the tale of her long journey. It really was a long journey. So many things had happened by the time she'd wound up here. Now, despite being in the middle of a war she wasn't sure

she'd survive, she found herself strangely at peace with herself, as calm as this early spring morning.

"Because I was a kaikyaku, I felt incredibly sorry for myself. I told myself that a fellow kaikyaku like the empress would take pity on me and help me out."

"You've really grown up, Suzu," Shoukei said.

Suzu waved her hand. "Oh, c'mon. It's hardly anything to boast about."

"I despised the Imperial Kei. I made her my favorite scapegoat. I couldn't forgive the fact that I'd been driven out of the Imperial Palace at the same time a girl my same age had been crowned Empress."

Shoukei recounted the details of her journey as well. The regicide of her father, the freezing winters spent at the rike, the time she was almost executed, and being sent to Kyou. How she'd escaped and fled to Ryuu, and the person she encountered there.

"If I hadn't met Rakushun, I'd still be in the same sorry state I was then. I owe him everything."

"Rakushun!" Youko exclaimed.

Shoukei turned to her. "He's a really good person. I had to believe that if the Imperial Kei was a friend of his, then she must be a good person too."

"I am?"

"Eh?" Suzu and Shoukei said together. They stopped and stared at her. "You're what?"

"I mean, the Imperial Kei you're talking about is me!"

Both Suzu and Shoukei's mouths dropped open.

"I know it must sound like a joke, but listening to your stories I had to say something."

Youko felt incredibly awkward. Suzu and Shoukei didn't look like they were buying it.

"The Imperial Kei? Sekishi?"

"Yeah. The ministers came up with that name. *The Red Child*. You see, because

of my hair.”

Their sense of astonishment slowly grew. “Is your name really Youshi?”

“It’s Youko. The characters are the same. *You* as in *taiyou* [the sun]. *Shi* as in *shison* [descendant].”

“You can’t be serious!” Suzu stared at Youko. Buried feelings groaned to life within her. Hadn’t she bought the dagger inside her vest in order to kill the Imperial Kei?

Shoukei gazed at Youko as well. The person she’d resented and envied for so long was right there in front of her. Long-forgotten emotions swelled within her breast. Had she ever really hated her that much?

“If you’re telling us the truth, then what in the world are you doing here?” *Why aren’t you in Kinpa, the Imperial Palace in Gyouten?* she meant.

“I’m a taika. I don’t know a thing about this world. I was being tutored by a man named Enho.”

“Enho—the man who was kidnapped?”

Youko nodded. “Shoukou had the rike attacked and Enho abducted. Shoukou may have carried out the orders, but one way or another Gahou was at the root of it. Shoukou says that Enho is now in Meikaku. I’ve been looking everywhere for him, trying to rescue him, and this is where I ended up.”

“*You didn’t have to get involved in something like this!*” Shoukei practically shouted at her. If she was the empress—really was the empress—then she should have simply dismissed Shoukou. Carrying on in this manner, so many people who’d never intended to put their lives on the line were suffering mortal injuries. How many people had died so far? Of the three men Kantai had ordered to Takuhou, one was already dead. The faces of mercenaries she’d become so accustomed were gone before she knew it. How many of Suzu’s comrades had been lost as well?

“I couldn’t order the Imperial Army to arrest Shoukou. I don’t have that kind of authority.”

“What do you mean you don’t? That doesn’t make any sense!”

"I don't. I truly don't. I told Keiki to relieve Shoukou of his post. The ministers wouldn't act without *sufficient grounds*. I had to present them with *convincing reasons* and *concrete evidence* to back them up. I don't have the trust of the bureaucracy."

"Why?"

"They say I'm incompetent. And I am. I don't know anything about this world. No matter how hard I think matters through, I can't say what the best solution is. The ministers don't trust empresses. This kingdom has had a bad run of empresses. When it comes to something like this, they're hardly going to leave things to my discretion."

"This is unbelievable." But Shoukei had heard too many times how Kei was not blessed by its empresses.

"I asked Keiki to mobilize the provincial guard but he wasn't able to. His minister of defense and his three commanding officers suddenly all caught colds."

Shoukei was too taken aback to speak.

"He returned to the palace to put the Imperial Court in order but it was too late. Enho had been kidnapped. The rike was attacked and a girl my age was murdered. Her brother was stabbed and now clings to life. He was immediately taken back to the palace, and while the doctors have done everything they can for him, we don't know whether he will live or die."

"*Doctors*," Suzu muttered to herself. Shoukei glanced at her. Suzu's eyes were focused on Youko.

"Yes, I know. A child died in this city as well. When I found him, the life was all but gone from him. There wasn't anything I could do to help."

"Really?" Shoukei asked. "You would have helped him if you'd been in time?"

Youko drew her brows together in obvious discomfort. "Of course. One life is worth as much as another."

"And if that child had suffered a less grievous wound?"

Youko's expression turned even more disagreeable. "And you, Shoukei? Would

you have walked by on the other side? Wouldn't you have at least taken him to a doctor? Isn't that the kind of thing that people normally do?"

"Yeah, sure," Shoukei said with a sigh. Suzu didn't say anything. She rested her forehead against the merlon.

"Look, as an empress, I'm nothing to write home about, okay? I had no idea my subjects were dying right and left, being taxed to death, worked to death, and suffering God knows what else. Saying I only feel compelled to help the unfortunate right there in front of me is a poor excuse. I know. But like I said, I'm pretty much a joke as far as empresses go. When I said I'd help Keikei or that other boy, that still means that some other kid in some other place else is going to die. But how can you ignore the suffering in front of your eyes?"

"You can't."

"Yeah," said Youko, bowing her head. "I'm sorry I don't exactly measure up."

Shoukei nodded. Hugging her arms around the merlon, Suzu suddenly burst out laughing.

"Suzu—"

"I know, I know," Suzu said, waving her hand back and forth. She clung to the merlon and buried her face in the crook of her arm, tears of mirth streaming down her cheeks as she laughed.

"Suzu, what is your problem?"

"But . . . I mean . . . this is so stupid!"

"Suzu, really!"

"Not knowing the slightest thing about her, I built up all these expectations, only to see them dashed. I didn't place all my hopes in Youko. I placed all my hopes in some big important person called the *empress*. What a fool I was!"

Youko stared at her, a perplexed expression on her face. Suzu flashed her a strained smile. "But that's the way it is with an empress, isn't it? Everybody burdens you with their own expectations. Nobody thinks about things from your perspective. And so we all get to wallow in our own disappointment. Don't you think?"

Shoukei looked up at the heavens and sighed. "Indeed."

"So what do you think I should do?" the puzzled Youko asked.

"Huh?" said Suzu, raising her head. "Well, there's no doubt about that, is there?"

Shoukei scowled at Suzu and then sighed again. "No, you're right. There isn't." She clapped Youko on the back. "We defeat the provincial guard and tear Gahou from power!"

Part XIX

Chapter 72

[19-1] In the dead of the night, Youko was awakened from a light sleep by the violent beating of a drum.

“What’s going on?”

Next to her, Suzu and Shoukei awoke with a start.

“An attack?”

“The provincial guard can’t have gotten here already!”

They jumped to their feet and rushed out of the guard tower onto the wall walk. The sound came from one of the drum turrets positioned at the four corners of the palace walls.

“What’s happened, Kantai?”

Standing on the wall walk, Kantai turned his severe countenance and gestured toward the south.

Youko gasped. She and Suzu and Shoukei stood rooted to the spot. The darkness spread out over the city of Takuhou. To the south, a light could be seen along the outer loop road. A red light. Flames.

“A fire?” queried Suzu.

Youko narrowed her eyes.

“Why?” somebody asked.

Sekki and Koshou came running.

“Koshou, there’s a fire—”

Sekki’s voice interrupted hers. “It’s the provincial guard.”

“What?” The people there all turned and looked at Sekki.

“This must be a strategy of Gahou’s. The guard intends to burn us out, along

with Shoukou and the city.”

“Nonsense!” came a cry from the gathering crowd.

“Koshou, what do we do?” a familiar voice asked. “Consider the time of night! We must wake the citizenry and muster them to put out the fires!”

“No!” Both Kantai and Sekki answered together.

“Why not, Sekki?”

“The guard are waiting for us. The cavalry has likely pushed on ahead of the infantry. They’re waiting for us to leave the palace. Send anybody out there, and the cavalry’s shock troops will set on them like a wolf pack.”

Kantai agreed. “Sekki’s right. Rush out of here and you’ll be running headlong into a trap. It will take hours for the fire to reach the palace. For the time being, we’d better watch and see how things develop.”

Koshou glanced back and forth between the two. “You mean to stand by and do nothing?”

“There’s probably nothing that we can do,” Sekki said. The sound of a pounding drum burst forth from another turret on the palace walls. Sekki hung his head. “Another fire’s been lit.”

“Sekki!” Koshou raised his arms. “If we turn our back on them, we’re no better than common murderers!” He said to Youko. “Let’s go.”

“Youshi! Koshou!”

Suzu put her hand on Sekki shoulder. “It’s wrong to get even with somebody out of a personal grudge, right? If we look the other way now, it will look like we did it all out of spite. We’ll lose the high moral ground.”

“Suzu—”

“There’s no saying how things would have turned out if Kantai and Shoukei hadn’t shown up. Since we were prepared for that eventuality all along, what if only we go?”

Sekki nodded. “Find a place where you can break through and secure an escape route for the people of the city.”

"All right, then." Koshou gave Sekki a slap on the back that practically sent him sprawling. "Move out!"

A man noticed the smoke and jumped out of bed. He took note of the sound of popping wood and the strange hot wind and shook his wife awake. After the many days filled with dread, she slept soundly on this unexpectedly quiet night.

"Wake up!" he shouted. He ran through the living room to the bedroom opposite and scooped his small daughter up in his arms. Still half-asleep, she opened her eyes. Soothing her and hurrying his wife along, they headed outside.

"What in the world!"

The avenue was a sea of flames. The man at once understood that the fire had become a firestorm.

"We've got to get out of the city! Now!"

This was what came from defying Shoukou. The people in Shisui had been born under an unlucky star. This was what happened when they questioned that fate. Until today, at least, the destroying angel had passed by his house.

They mingled together with other scrambling, befuddled people running toward the Monkey Gate. The man stopped in his tracks and stared. The Monkey Gate was closed, and the mounted knights arrayed in front of the gate were up to no good. The ground beneath the horses' hooves was strewn with bodies.

He grasped his wife's arm, turned on his heels, and dragged her back the way they'd come. His wife screamed as an old man next to him took an arrow in the chest.

What did he do? What had he ever done to the likes of them? He had nothing to do with those rebels. Why kill him and all his kin on account of what *they* did?

For the time being, the rest of them could only run frantically down the street toward the inner loop road, away from the conflagration. The flames licked the sky all around them, filling him with horror. Here, there, and everywhere. From every point of the compass. The tongues of fire licking upwards next to a gate an instant later had crept along the ridgepoles and joined with a neighboring fire, growing much stronger.

What is going on?

Any escape had been closed off. His daughter opened her eyes and began to wail. “At the very least—” he said, turning around. A red light glowed atop the ink dark walls of the palace, lending it a foreboding and magisterial appearance. “You go to the palace.”

“But—” his wife objected.

He handed the child to her. “They’re the ones who overthrew Shoukou and caused all this. They won’t abandon you. Go!” he said, giving her a push.

At the same time, the west White Dragon Gate opened and people spilled out. He froze in place.

“Get back!”

He stared at the horse and rider galloping toward him.

“Watch out for ambushes! The fire won’t spread easily beyond the main boulevard! There are bound to be arsonists still in the city!”

“Understood!” they shouted, as they sprinted past him.

In all the confusion, the man hadn’t budged an inch. Left behind in front of the gate, a boy perched on a horse waved at him. “They’ll show you the way! Follow them!”

Amidst the jumble of human activity in front of the White Dragon Gate, Kantai sprang onto the back of his kitsuryou. He turned to his two subordinates. “As much as possible, keep the people away from the palace walls. An attack could come in the midst of all this turmoil. Take the wounded inside the palace if necessary but keep on your toes. There may be provincial guardsmen lying in wait among them.”

“So you’ll be going as well, then?”

Kantai grinned at the men before him. “I can’t afford not to. No man’s praise can make up for Koshou’s scorn.” He shouldered his lance. “I’ll leave the rest to your good offices.”

The men bowed. Kantai saluted and spurred on the kitsuryou.

Chapter 73

[19-2] “Koshou!”

Alerted by Youko’s cry, Koshou scanned his surroundings. His eyes were drawn to several men charging out of a nearby alleyway. Seeing weapons in their hands, he swung his broadsword, eviscerating the first and impaling the second and third on the back swing.

Youko charged into the melee and cut down the remaining two.

“These bushwhackers are everywhere.”

“Very much so.”

The main boulevard ran straight from the White Tiger Gate to the Rooster Gate. Urging the panicking civilians to move toward the palace, Koshou wiped off his sword. As expected, even a winter weapon eventually lost its edge. They regrouped with their colleagues and crossed the main boulevard. The fire pressed south along the streets. Where the street dipped down, Koshou came to a halt.

They saw the silhouettes of mounted riders coming toward them, dragging down the small shops that lined the streets as they went along. Without all the debris, the street would be close to eighty paces wide, and it’d be rare for a fire to breach the gap. For the time being, the fires raging to the left and right of the street had not approached close enough to singe them.

“Those bastards are fast,” Koshou growled. “Aim for the horse’s legs.”

“Roger!” came the acknowledgments from around him.

They stared each other down. The horsemen made the first move. As soon as the order was given, the earth trembled and the horses launched forward. Koshou and his companions sized up the situation and readied themselves.

Youko stepped off to the side, leaned over and addressed the ground at her feet. “If you would, please,” she said.

“Yes,” the voice answered in return and faded away.

The horses bore down on them. The horse in the lead suddenly crashed to the ground. “What?” puzzled Koshou. The fallen horse tripped up the one behind it. The third horse just managed to skirt the pileup, but then for some reason tumbled to the ground as well—as if its hooves had been yanked out from under.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“Strike while the iron’s hot,” Youko’s cool voice said next to him.

Koshou glanced at Youko but she had already taken off after the fallen knights.

When Kantai arrived on the scene, the street was a confusion of friend and foe: fallen steeds and the onrushing civilians, panicked soldiers returning fire.

“You seem to be handling things.” Kantai dismounted from the kitsuryou and jumped down next to Koshou. The kitsuryou turned and set off back to the palace.

“Not our doing. We seem to have some friendly spirits on our side. The horses took it upon themselves to bite the dust without us lifting a finger.”

“Huh.” Kantai readied his lance. Made of forged steel down to the hilt, the lance was Kantai’s personal winter weapon.

“And with so little light, I haven’t been shot at in some time now.”

“A good thing too, having good luck and a fair wind at your back. Let’s take the fight to the Rooster Gate!”

“I’m with you!” said Koshou and started off at a run. Kantai followed after him, skewering the unseated knights milling about in disarray.

A soldier bounded to his feet. Youko batted away the spear tip thrust at her. Having lost his weapon, the soldier ran away. Youko didn’t bother chasing him. She looked up. The Rooster Gate wasn’t far off. She could see a catapult there but no projectiles had recently flown in their direction. She smiled to herself. At her heels a voice said, “Soldiers have begun a headlong retreat from the outer gate.”

“Thanks. And how are you holding out?” Shirei were not invulnerable. Winter weapons could mortally wound them. An alert soldier could sense them coming, even hiding in the shadows.

“A few scratches. Nothing serious.”

“Sorry for the trouble. Could you do another job for me?”

“The provincial guard stationed at the Rooster Gate?”

“Yes.” Youko indicated the nearby enemy with her sword.

“By your command.”

The voice disappeared. At the same time, a soldier drew his sword and closed on her. Their blades clashed, throwing off sparks. Steel ground against steel. She turned his sword aside, he stumbled off balance, and she swatted him in the back with the flat of the blade. He didn’t retreat but slashed at her again. This time, she parried the attack, aiming for the hilt. He dropped the sword and ran off yelping.

“You don’t seem to enjoy killing people,” Kantai called out to her.

“Better to resolve a conflict without a death than with one.”

“If we’re not culling the enemy’s forces then what’s the point?”

“I’m hoping to chip away at their morale instead.”

“Aren’t you a strange one. Handling a sword the way you do and yet spouting such sentimental nonsense.” There was laughter in his voice. “Who were you speaking with just now?”

“Nobody. I’ve got a habit of talking to myself.”

“Oh?” Kantai said, stepping away from her. Three soldiers ran at them waving their swords. He mowed them down with his lance, like wheat before a sickle. The heavy armor groaned. Struck above the knees, the three crumpled into a heap on top of each other.

Youko was amazed. That Koshou possessed the strength to wield a hundred-pound broadsword was impressive enough. The way Kantai twirled around that solid steel lance was beyond incredible. It must weigh at least three hundred pounds. As burly a man as Kantai was, he didn’t weigh three hundred pounds. Carrying a steel lance as massive as himself and whirling it about the way he did defied common sense. And yet he showed no signs of running out of energy.

"He's some kind of monster," Koshou said in an amazed tone of voice. He was breathing hard by now. He held a scimitar in his hand.

"What happened to your broadsword?"

"Broke it."

"Ah," Youko nodded.

She ran down the street. Three thousand had stormed out of the palace. They established a fire line in the middle of the main boulevard and moved forward to extinguish the flames. The Rooster Gate was before them. Youko's platoon had been significantly reduced in number. Nevertheless, they had to hold the gate and the city streets between them and the main gate of the palace.

For the time being, the firestorms in the city behind her seemed to be abating.

Chapter 74

[19-3] Suzu and Shoukei and their squad galloped through the city, directing civilians dazed and confused by the fire to the south. “Extinguish the fires! If you intend to run for it then head for the Rooster Gate!”

Here and there, guardsmen were still lying in wait. They evaded them as best they could, but pretty soon their strength began to flag. They were ambushed over and over. A mercenary next to Shoukei was struck and felled. They just managed to escape as more soldiers rushed them, firing arrows and thrusting pikes. Another horse was struck in the legs and collapsed.

Not far off, Suzu screamed. “Sekki!”

The rider of the fallen horse was Sekki. He hit the ground and was sent sprawling. Light infantrymen charged him. Shoukei swung her mount around, but there was no way she would reach him in time. She spotted a soldier swinging a scimitar and screamed as well. Sekki wore no armor that could protect him from such a weapon.

“Sekki!”

The heavy clang rang out from a violent impact. The soldier waving the scimitar dropped his weapon, threw his arms over his head, and squatted down on the ground. Suzu stared in amazement.

“Enough already!” The white-haired old man swung the hunk of wood a second time at the soldier. “Who do you think you are?”

A rider approached on Shoukei’s blind side and delivered the *coup de grace* to the soldier.

Sekki sat up and looked at the old man holding the wooden door bolt. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.”

A sinewy hand reached down to him. Sekki grasped the hand and was pulled to his feet. Sekki wasn’t injured so badly that he couldn’t walk. He went to let go

but the old man held on. Sekki turned to him.

The old man asked, “Is Shoukou dead?”

“We’ve captured him. He’s being held in the prefectural offices.”

“Ah,” he said, at last letting go of Sekki’s hand. “Is there anything more I can do?”

Sekki smiled. “You can help put out the fires.”

The man nodded and turned around. Suza smiled down at Sekki. “See? There are people here who get it.”

Sekki grasped her hand and she pulled him onto the back of the horse.

“Let’s go. We still haven’t made it all the way around the city.”

They fought their way to the Rooster Gate and dispatched the platoon of soldiers there. The area around the gate fell quiet. No incoming arrows. The guard towers atop the gate were silent.

Youko permitted herself a small smile. Koshou gazed at the scene disbelievingly and turned to her. “What have you been up to?”

Youko returned the look and casually shrugged. “What could I have possibly been up to? Say, do you think we should open the gate?”

Koshou scowled and approached the gate. The gate had a portcullis but it hadn’t been lowered. He pushed aside the assault wagon barricading the three doors of the gate and released the bolts.

It was likely that the arrows would come flying as soon as he opened the large center door. Knowing that, he hesitated. Youko’s hand did not as she opened the smaller auxiliary gate. She often pressed forward in this reckless manner. When she did, Koshou had learned, it usually meant the danger was gone.

Kantai opened the second auxiliary gate to Koshou’s left. “Will you look at that,” he said, in a deeply curious voice. He turned to Youko, who was securing the ring in the door to a hook on the wall. “Youshi, did you know there were no enemy outside?”

There was no sign of the enemy outside the gates. Aside from some wounded,

the scattered corpses and weapons, the countryside was almost bucolic.

"Ah—" said Youko, and shook her head.

"You didn't seem very uncertain about opening that door?"

"I, uh, forgot that there might be enemy out there."

"You—" Kantai started to say.

Youko interrupted him. "Enemy are approaching from the other direction. Don't you think we'd better hurry up and get ready for them?"

Koshou and Kantai exchanged glances. A man ran up to the door that Koshou was holding, pushed it open and latched it.

Koshou thought he was from Meikaku. Kantai thought he was from Takuhou. Having secured the door, the man pointed at the assault wagon. "Wouldn't it be best to move that and set up a defensive position?"

"Sure," said Koshou and Kantai, and then noticed that the man was shaking so bad his teeth were chattering. At this late stage, neither Koshou nor Kantai had seen anybody in their squads trembling this badly.

Koshou grinned and gave the man a whack on the shoulders. "Right you are. Thanks for the advice!"

As soon as they'd set up a defensive line outside the gate, they heard the sound of approaching horses.

"They're coming."

Koshou readied himself. In a peevish voice he exclaimed, "Dammit! We didn't have time to let the civilians escape!"

The red light from the city shone on his face. Youko peered up at the guard towers. *Is this light a blessing? Or does the smoke cause more harm than good?* It'd be hard to shoot at the enemy without any light to see by. But with the thick smoke filling the streets, it was getting hard to see anything even with the light.

"What do you say, Koshou? Should we shut the gates and return to the city center?"

"No other choice but to."

"There's an assault wagon," she heard Kantai say.

The hand gripping the hilt of her sword shook slightly, as did the ground beneath her feet. On unbroken ground, an assault wagon was the equal of ten mounted knights. The heavy rolling sound of the armored wagon echoed through the smoke.

The few civilians who had girded up their loins to join them retreated back down and sought the refuge at the palace. Only the battle-tested massed at the Rooster Gate. Even so, Youko and her fellow defenders were at an overwhelming disadvantage. The provincial guard would not only strike at the Rooster Gate. They'd have no choice but to divide their strength among the other gates at well.

They had about five hundred fighters gathered at the Rooster Gate. The provincial guard typically maintained reserves of 7500 cavalry in three regiments of 2500 soldiers each. Two regiments had been dispatched from Meikaku to Takuhou. With one regiment pushing on ahead, that meant another 2500 would be bringing up the rear. They could deploy at least four hundred to each of the twelve gates.

The rebels had broken the siege at the Rooster Gate, but simple math said that a good 4500 cavalry still surrounded Takuhou.

"Shut the gate!" ordered Koshou, and turned on his heels.

The sound of the assault wagon pressed nearer. Faint shapes and shadows could be seen through the smoke. Youko's blinked. It wasn't an assault wagon. It was more like a wedge out of the Great Wall itself moving slowly toward them.

"A siege tower," Kantai said in a low voice. "They came with siege towers."

"Siege towers?" queried Koshou.

"The forward portions are lined with armor, and behind them sandbags, giving cover to the soldiers. The big ones are called *cloud bridges*. That one's a *thunder bridge*. It's drawn by a bunch of siege wagons, each pulled by teams of horses. Ordinary mounts won't do, though. They'd tire too quickly."

"You're not so normal yourself."

"No less normal than Youshi. That thing there's for attacking the palace. If we

don't stop it now, even if we shut the gates it'll break through the walls."

"What's the best way to attack it, then?" Youko asked.

Kantai raised his head in response to her question. "Koshou—" he said.

"What?" Koshou asked, looking back at him.

Kantai gestured with his lance. "Prepare fire arrows. As best you can, man the wall walks and fire down on the teams pushing the siege tower forward. You can use this. You hold it at the base and brandish it about. If it's too much for one person, make it a two-man operation. At any rate, if you can stop the siege tower coming in from the north and check the progress of the cavalry, head back to the city."

Koshou took the lance and grimaced. "We'll see what we can do. What are we going to do about the one coming from the south?"

"Leave it to me."

Youko peered up at Kantai. "With your bare hands?"

Kantai laughed. "My bare hands will do. You can cover me."

Youko furrowed her brow. The siege tower moved ever closer. They didn't have time to debate the subject.

"You going or not? Hey, you up there!" Koshou barked out. "Cover them!" The fighters before the gate suddenly stormed northward. Kantai launched himself southward.

He's fast. Youko followed after him, matching his unusually rapid gait. She drew her sword. Only because she had ordered the shirei to eliminate the archers could she proceed without fear of arrows.

At the same time her eyes grew wide with amazement. Kantai's body sank lower and lower to the ground. For a moment she feared he had been struck by an arrow but he sank ever lower. More than sinking, she got the impression that his body was contracting. This wasn't because of an arrow. His forward progress made that clear.

What in the world!

The shape and form of his body seemed to be dissolving. A moment later, he began to grow larger. His mutating form was both growing and taking on completely new dimensions. Or so it seemed to her.

From the wall walks as well, from every direction, a great stir went up. Kantai was some different kind of human. His hands emerged—no doubt about it—as *forepaws*. He shot across the ground up to the siege tower as fast as an arrow. He coiled up his body—now resembling a small mountain—and raked the side of the siege tower with a huge forepaw.

That single blow shook the thunder bridge. The siege wagons connected to it rocked back and forth and crashed to the earth, halting its forward progress.

He's a hanjuu.

Lances jabbed at the enormous bear as it reared up on his hind legs. Youko ran forward to sever the spear tips from the shafts.

"Hey, my apologies," came a deep voice suffused with laughter. With a swipe of its paw, the huge bear took off the whole front of the assault wagon and sent it tumbling through the air.

As she swung her sword, Youko had to smile as well. "Just as I thought, the strength of no ordinary man."

The sun rose over the hills to the east of Takuhou. The city still smoldered, the smoke blurring the morning rays. But at least no tongues of fire could be seen.

Between the White Dragon Gate at the palace and the Rooster Gate, a collection of wagons blocked off the side streets, securing direct access to the Rooster Gate. Many silhouettes could be seen occupying the guard towers over the twelve city gates. The countless figures of men and women alike were perched atop the walls stretching out from the main gate.

Meeting fierce resistance, the Wa Provincial cavalry ringing the city had retreated for the time being. After a great deal of effort, they'd managed to join up with infantry advancing along the highway south of Takuhou and were setting up battle lines on the plains outside the Horse Gate.

The provincial guard rushed here had no grasp of the number of enemy forces they were facing—to what extent the citizens of Takuhou had joined up with the

rebels or whether they were only holed up in the citadel and protecting that.

This civilian rebellion was nothing to make light of, the foot messengers said. Already the civilians had taken over the ramparts and were keeping a valuable prize within the prefectoral offices themselves. They were going to have to attack the formidable fortress at the heart of the city. Amidst this gloomy realization, even more startling news arrived:

This morning before dawn, Meikaku fell into chaos.

Part XX

Chapter 75

[20-1] “Great!” exclaimed a smiling Koshou. “We kept ‘em pinned down for three days, just like Kantai wanted.”

Looking out from the turret at a corner of the city wall, he could see that the provincial guard troops bivouacked there were pulling up stakes. From the start, they’d faced a fortress of a palace. Shoukou’s large-scale defensive works had turned Takuhou into the size of a provincial palace.

“What happened? It’s amazing!”

“More than amazing. It’s unbelievable,” said Kantai. In the turret, Shoukei and Suzu exchanged glances and smiled.

“I’m starving.”

Koshou sat down on a bench. There was plenty of food in the prefectoral palace but nobody to prepare it. It’d been left up to the palace cooks to keep the many prisoners of war fed. But as Koshou and the rest of them had no idea where the loyalties of the palace staff lay, they hesitated eating what was being served. The staff had at last been increased and the night before they’d finally managed a cooked meal. But they hadn’t had the time to eat since.

Suzu giggled. “Some of the women in the city are bringing meals. Just hold on a bit longer.”

Koshou sighed pitifully. A voice called out from the top floor of the corner turret, “Koshou! Reinforcements!”

“What?” Koshou leapt to his feet and ran to the stairs leading up to the top floor. Everybody followed after him.

“Koshou!” The man looking down from the top of the staircase looked pretty green.

“Reinforcements?”

"Their standards?"

The man's voice rose to a nervous squeak. "Dragon banners in the west!"

Koshou and Kantai practically fell over each other rushing up the stairs. Shoukei gasped, "Dragon banners—that's the standard of the Empress." She seized the arm of the man who came stumbling down the stairs. "Dragon standards? Really?"

"I—ah—"

"What color are the ensigns?"

"Purple."

Shoukei and Suzu exchanged surprised looks. Youko darted up the stairs. *Dragon standards and purple ensigns. They could only mean one thing.*

The Palace Guard.

Koshou and Kantai rushed down the stairs. When they ran out on the wall walk, Shoukei and Suzu climbed the stairs.

"Youko! Is it really the Palace Guard?"

Looking out the window, Youko nodded, her face white.

"Why would the Palace Guard come here?"

"I have no idea."

From the window, Youko stared out at the nearby hills. A large army was proceeding down the highway, cavalry in the lead. They bore the dragon standard. There could be no doubts about it. This was indeed the standard of the Palace Guard, that should currently be stationed at Gyouten.

"It looks like we won't be ending up under the thumb of the provincial guard."

Shoukei stood next to Youko. "Gahou's got an ally in Gyouten. That person would be in the position to mobilize the Palace Guard."

Youko turned to her. "The Ministry of Summer?"

"What kind of person is the Defense Minister?"

"To tell the truth—" Youko had to think about it. She mentally traced the

organizational chart of the Imperial Court. What faction did the Minister of Summer belong to? The army wouldn't move on any but the Minister's orders. Positing that there was a person who could mobilize the army, the person must wield significant power among the ministers.

"Seikyou."

"Who?" said Shoukei.

"The previous Chousai, prime minister of the Rikkan. He heads the most powerful faction in the Court."

"That's it, then."

"Wait a minute." Suzu spoke up, in a puzzled voice. "Why would Chousai mobilize the army on Gahou's behalf? Mobilizing the Imperial Army would be strange enough. But the Palace Guard? That's because Youko is here!"

"Oh, it's for Gahou," said Shoukei. "Nothing else makes sense, does it? So is Gahou using Chousai or is Chousai using Gahou?"

"But Seikyou hates Gahou."

"Hates him? Why?"

Youko unconsciously caught her breath. She remembered Seikyou declaring how Gahou's behavior was unforgivable but then saying that without evidence there was nothing he could do. She heaved a vexed sigh.

"Faking a feud is a piece of cake. If he's getting Gahou to do his dirty business, then of course he would pretend to disapprove in public. The kind of people who would slight the Empress and mobilize the Palace Guard on a whim would certainly be capable of the rest. It was probably Chousai's faction advocating the sacking of the province lord of Baku."

"You're right. It was."

"In short, Chousai hated the marquis of Baku. A province lord who followed the Way and loved his subjects would be an eyesore to him."

"Um—" Suzu said, somewhat dubiously. "Do you think the kidnapping of Enho and the destruction of the Evergreen Seminary was the work of this Chousai as well?"

“The Evergreen Seminary?”

“It was on Gahou’s orders. So was sending Enho to Meikaku.”

“That’s definitely the case. What about the Wa Province Lord looking so disapprovingly on seminaries in other provinces? If Chousai was pulling the strings behind the scenes, then it starts to make sense. A fellow of the Evergreen Seminary like marquis Baku would prove a nuisance. They’d despise all seminaries like it. Graduates entering the Imperial government on the recommendation of the marquis would cause them nothing but problems. It all fits together, doesn’t it?”

Youko sighed again. Then she narrowed her eyes. “You’ve got a devious mind, Shoukei.”

“I understand palace intrigues very well. I didn’t hang around in the palace for thirty years for nothing. A few things I got down, if I say so myself.”

“Unbelievable,” Youko said with a sly smile.

Suzu tugged on her sleeve. “But what do we do now? The provincial guard was bad enough. But how can it not be over when the Palace Guard arrive?”

Youko knit her brows. “The Palace Guard are a tough lot, particularly the air wing of the Palace Guard. There’s a frightening lot of them.”

“More than fifteen?”

“If all three regiments of the Palace Guard were mustered, the total would come to three companies of one hundred soldiers each. And along with them, an equal number of soldiers equipped with pegasi.”

Suzu was rendered speechless. Youko’s green eyes blazed. “But I shall not countenance this being done without my permission!”

Chapter 76

[20-2] The flags of the Palace Guard ringing the city had the citizens of the city in a high state of agitation. The Palace Guard was different from the provincial guard. People recognized the dragon standard as that of the Empress, bearing the authority of the Kingdom.

The Imperial Army has come to suppress the rebellion.

Voices of despair filled the streets. Even if they surrendered, the punishment would be severe. Fearing that not a single person would be spared, they prepared to flee. Koshou's and Kantai's mates were no exception.

Clearly, people said, the empress was watching Shoukou's back. They had been mistaken, others cried in frustration. Anyway, *they* were the rebels, not themselves.

One regiment had already arrived, and the standards of two more could be seen behind them. Civilians rushed to the gates, claiming they were going to surrender to the Imperial Army.

“Earn the displeasure of the empress and it’s over.”

“We didn’t plan on going along with treason!”

“Earning the displeasure of Shoukou amounts to the same thing. Earn the displeasure of the Kingdom, and God knows what will happen.”

They’d acted on their own and brought calamity upon Takuhou. These criticisms all fell on Koshou: “You’ve made things bad enough already!”

Koshou sat dejectedly in the guard tower above the main palace gate. “Why did they come here?” he asked. There was hardly a soul present. The reason was, it’d been heard whispered about that if Koshou’s head was presented to the Imperial Army, the people of Takuhou could win some forgiveness.

“What do we do?” asked Kantai.

Koshou hung his head and sighed. “What does it matter what we do? Might as well open the Horse Gate and let escape those who want to.” His tone of voice

was casual, but there was no life left in his words.

"The moment you open the gate, the Imperial Army will come rushing through."

"Too late to worry about that now." Koshou looked up at Kantai, standing in front of him. "Kantai, everybody knows you're a hanjuu now. You'd better take your kitsuryou and get out of here."

"Hey, are you calling me a coward?"

"Naw." Koshou smiled and looked around the room. "I just don't think there's any saving us. It's better not to get anybody else involved." He called out, "Tell the men securing the gate that as soon as they get here, they should get ready to escape. And watch out for the civilians. They're a little pissed at us."

"But Koshou—"

"Even if we're to be executed as traitors, we've still got our honor. We can't keep everybody locked up like they're hostages."

"Koshou, wait!" Suzu cried out. "Don't give up so soon!"

"She's right," Shoukei agreed.

"Hold on a little while longer. They're waiting for us to give up without a fight. Otherwise, they would have attacked already. There's still time. It's not over until it's over. Don't rush to any conclusions."

Koshou took a breath and raised his head. A self-mocking smile came to his lips. "I'm the last one who wants to be thought a coward."

"It's not over until it's over," Shoukei and Suzu chorused.

Koshou and Kantai both narrowed their eyes suspiciously. "Speaking of which," Koshou said, raising his hand, "Where's Youshi?"

Suzu and Shoukei exchanged glances. Shoukei was the one who spoke first. "She's stationed at the Horse Gate. Even if you told her to open the gate, I don't think she would."

As Koshou opened his mouth to say something, a man came up the stairs of the guard tower. "Koshou!"

"What's up?"

"Some people are here. They say they represent the people of the city."

Everybody scowled at the prospect, but Koshou bigheartedly invited them to come up. Sekki moved over next to Koshou. Then everybody else did the same. They couldn't take any chances that their guests might be harboring funny thoughts about taking a shot at Koshou.

The party consisted of six middle-aged men. Representing them was a man by the name of Kakugo. "Don't get the idea that we're cooperating with you," he said dismissively. "We consider ourselves the prisoners of war of you rebels. We wish to be freed, and cannot abide being thought of as rebels like yourselves. You and your gang of outlaws—"

As Kakugo continued to cast aspersions on Koshou, the other five joined in. By the time Koshou had sighed in resignation, Suzu spoke up in a loud voice: "Enough already!"

Not only Kakugo, but Koshou and Kantai as well jumped in surprise.

"Didn't you despise Shoukou? Did you like the way he governed?"

"Hold your tongue, missy."

"I'm not holding my tongue! If you're so willing to give Shoukou a pass, then you're no better than him! You've got no business coming here and whining about it. We'll hogtie you the same we did Shoukou!"

"Suzu—" Koshou said a bit severely.

Suzu returned the look. "And when did you turn into a mouse? You've got no reason to doubt yourself, listening to these fools." Koshou hadn't done anything wrong. And nobody was going to tell her the people of this city didn't hate Shoukou.

"I joined Koshou after Shoukou killed a boy who was like a brother to me. Shoukou ran over him in his carriage. Nobody blamed Shoukou. Nobody chased him down and dragged him from his carriage. I thought that was because you were afraid of him. If that's not the case, if you're all willing to overlook his actions, then you're all my enemies! I'll forgive none of you!"

"Point taken, miss. I'm not saying we didn't hate Shoukou, but we want to live." Kakugo declared, "We had no choice with a man like him but to bow our heads and go along! We're thankful that you've overthrown Shoukou, but we have no desire to throw our lives away. We love our families—do you think there's something wrong with that? You may have slain one beast, but the empress is sure to appoint a bigger monster in his place."

"The empress is not our enemy!"

Kakugo shouted, "Then what's the Palace Guard doing here? Are you saying the empress would condone an insurrection in Takuhou? Is that what you're saying?"

"You're wrong!" Shoukei cried out. "The empress knows what's been going on here. Do you know of the three beasts that prowl this Kingdom?"

Kakugo heaved a sigh and blinked several times. "Shoukou, the governor of Shisui Prefecture. Gahou, the Province Lord of Wa. And Seikyou, the Chousai."

"Hey," said Koshou. The rest of them as well looked at Shoukei with dubious expressions. Shoukei smiled at them in turn.

"That is indeed the case. The coin wrung out of Shisui flows into Wa. And what is collected in Wa fills Seikyou's pockets. In exchange for burning down the seminaries, sullying the name of the respected marquis of Baku and having him expelled from the Imperial Court, and then attacking the rike, he gave them safe refuge. The provincial guard were ordered here for the same reason. If Shoukou or Gahou were ever arrested, things could get very dicey for Seikyou. That's why he sent the Palace Guard to Takuhou."

"How did you figure that out?" Kantai asked.

Suzu and Shoukei exchanged glances. "Because the empress didn't dispatch the Palace Guard. The empress sympathizes with the plight of the people of Takuhou. It was Seikyou and Seikyou alone who sent them. That's why the Palace Guard are holding their positions outside the city gates and haven't attacked. They've got no legal orders to. They're hoping to cow us and wait us out and get us to surrender on our own."

"But—!"

"You see, Kantai, for as much power as Seikyou wields, there are equal forces arrayed against him in the Imperial Court. The Court is divided into two factions —for and against Seikyou. Do you think those opposing him will remain silent while he orders the Palace Guard around like they were his personal bodyguards? But if he only mobilized them and dispatched them to Takuhou he could always say it was a bluff. And if that results in a suppression of the rebellion, well, another feather in his cap. But if it comes down to a fight, then even for a former Chousai, mere excuses won't suffice. The Palace Guard is the domain of the empress alone."

"But they're going to attack any minute!" Kakugo yelled. "And when they do, it's all over! Don't you understand anything?"

"The empress will save us. Please do not act prematurely."

Kakugo jabbed a finger in Shoukei's face. "What kind of reassurance is that? The empress and Seikyou have probably been in this together all along!"

"That's impossible!" chorused Suzu and Shoukei. Neither could hold back a faint smile.

Kantai chuckled. "Well, the way you two are going on, it sounds like you're on regular speaking terms with the empress."

Shoukei and Suzu shared a look. Shoukei said, "We are."

"You can't be serious!" Kakugo bellowed. "Since when are girls like you granted an audience with the empress?"

Suzu was at a loss how to answer. Shoukei caught her eye, nodded, and spoke up instead. "You said it, Kakugo. It must strike you as quite odd that I should be granted an audience with the empress."

"Of course it must!"

Shoukei bore down on him with her words. "My name is Shoukei, daughter of the Imperial Hou, emperor of the Kingdom of Hou. Do you think it odd that the princess royal of one kingdom should be granted an audience with the empress of another? If you have any doubts as to the legitimacy of this my claim, then you may inquire of Gekkei, province lord of Kei. Ask him if he knows the princess royal of Hou, whose full name is Son Shou."

Kakugo and Koshou and the rest of them stared at her, opened-mouthed.

"My father recently passed away. I entreated with the Imperial Kei and was invited to the Kingdom of Kei. The Imperial Kei requested that I sojourn in Wa Province in order to ascertain the state of affairs here and report back to her. Through a strange set of connections, I ended up helping Koshou here. But the Imperial Kei is aware of all of this. She wishes to take this opportunity to arrest Seikyou. I can promise you that the empress would not be pleased to hear you blaming Koshou and carrying on like rats deserting a sinking ship."

"This is nonsense!" Kakugo's face clearly showed his disbelief.

Suzu reached into her pocket. "Kakugo, read this."

Kakugo took the item the girl was holding up. It was obviously a passport. So? his expression said, and Suzu told him to look on the other side. Kakugo turned it over and visibly stiffened.

A seal in red and India ink. No, an Imperial Seal.

"In the Kingdom of Sai, I served Mistress Suibi on Mt. Ha. Having received permission from the Imperial Sai herself, I set forth to the Kingdom of Kei to visit the Imperial Kei. If you wish to confirm this, please direct any questions to Choukan Palace. That is, only if you doubt the veracity of this Imperial Seal."

Kakugo looked back and forth between the passport and the two girls. The girls smiled back at him. "Believe in the Imperial Kei and wait. There is no way she will think the worse of you for doing so."

"You're a scary pair, you two," said Koshou, examining Suzu's passport. He handed it back to her and stared into her eyes. "What you just said, was that all true?"

Kakugo and his entourage had already agreed to wait and left the tower. The rumors were racing through the city, and if only in the slightest, the sense of fear and dread had begun to abate.

Suzu and Shoukei glanced at each other. Shoukei answered with a shrug. "As long as they believe it's true, it's true. The end results will not lie."

Koshou leaned forward quizzically. Shoukei waved her hand back and forth. "I

don't really know if the Imperial Army will attack or not. But the air cavalry has not arrived. No attack has come thus far, so I have no reason to believe I'm mistaken. What we must do is trust in the Imperial Kei and wait. That is no lie. That is the complete truth."

"Okay, then!" Koshou slapped his knees. "Maybe it's one chance in a thousand, but we'll hold our positions along the walls."

"Koshou!" Suzu and Shoukei said together.

"I believe you two. We'll wait until the Imperial Kei and her entourage arrives."

"Good." Shoukei sighed and looked out at the city. When she turned back to the Horse Gate, her eyes widened in surprise. "Suzu!"

"What?" Suzu came running.

Shoukei pointed out the window. "There!"

Koshou and the rest of them piled up next to the window. "It can't be!"

Everybody in the city was on pins and needles. The anxiety could be tasted in the air. The Imperial Army was fearsome. But so were the rebels. Those who wished it all to end feared an attack by the Imperial Army, and feared as well the retribution that would follow. Those who wished to flee feared reprisals by the rebels. In the end, they feared doing anything at all, the consequence of Takuhou being ruled for so long by the likes of Shoukou.

All the day long they looked up with apprehension at the walls. As long as there was no great commotion along the wall walks, then they could reassure themselves that things were fine for the time being.

A woman looked up at the walls for the umpteenth time, and her mouth dropped open in amazement.

"Look!"

Reacting to the sound of her voice, those around her looked as well. Their mouths opened and their eyes went wide with surprise.

Chapter 77

[20-3] Youko gazed from the guard tower at the surrounding countryside. She could clearly see the growing number of military units pitching camp among the hillocks bordering the fields. Though the army showed no signs of advancing, that didn't mean they did not intend to fight. The troops garrisoned along the wintry slopes were felling trees in the forest.

The Imperial Army was an intimidating sight. That was indeed so, but the provincial guard were the ones on the move. They were making siege weapons, a man in the guard tower pointed out.

“Starting now?”

“These siege weapons will be huge. They’ll use whatever timber is available on the battlefield. If they don’t need a large number, they’ll get it done in half a day. As long as they’ve got wheels available, that is.”

“I see,” said Youko, returning her gaze to the countryside. In fact, the enemy army was not her concern. The sun slowly crossed the heavens. She searched the skies. Her patience was wearing thin. And suddenly, there he was.

“He’s here.”

“Eh?” the man next to her said, glancing at her.

Youko spun around and ran to the guard tower.

People along the wall walk stared up at the sky and gaped.

“But what is it?”

“It has to be—”

The voices arose in ones and twos. Hands were raised and fingers pointed at the sky.

“Why is it here?”

“But that’s the—!”

Not a youma or a pegasus. Not human. It was a beast. Its body resembled a

deer, with a coat of glowing amber and a mane of gold. There was no one in the Kingdom of Kei who didn't know what it was. They would have seen the paintings in the shrines and temples and in the government offices.

"*The kirin.*"

Youko made her way through the astonished crowds. The circumstances notwithstanding, she raised her voice. "Keiki!"

He flew low through the air and landed on the wall walk. Voices cried out, voices suffused with fear, surprise, even joy. Youko pushed through the crush of people and ran to the creature.

"Keiki! You got here!"

"You have beckoned me to such a place as this?" he asked, clearly aghast at the surroundings. "The smell of death is quite pungent."

"Sorry. My bad."

"So this is what happens when you tell me not to worry? You have dragged my shirei through all this grime as well?"

"Listen, you can bitch to me all you want later. For now, take me to the encampment of the Palace Guard."

"You're asking me to comport myself as an ordinary pegasus?"

"I seem to recall that mustering the Palace Guard is *your* responsibility."

The purple eyes met Youko's and turned away.

"C'mon, Keiki. Just a bit more patience. Please." She knew Keiki was exactly the last person she should ever bring to a battlefield. He would truly suffer carrying her, she was spattered with so much blood.

"Let us depart, then." He turned his magnificent head toward the countryside. Youko climbed onto his back.

"Youko!"

The cry came from the base of the walls. She recognized Suzu and Shoukei looking up from the street, waving at her. Youko hardly had time to smile in return before Keiki leapt into the air. As he sprinted toward the flags of the

Palace Guard, he said in a quiet voice, “The child lives.”

A smile rose to Youko’s face.

The troops situated along the borders of the fields looked up as one into the sky and gaped. General Jinrai, leading the Palace Guard army of the left, was no exception.

Why? he asked, catching his breath. Why was a person riding on the back of the kirin?

It wasn’t enough that someone was *riding* the kirin. That someone pointed straight at Jinrai—and the battle flags—and flew toward him. He unconsciously took a step backward.

I can’t go along with this. Mobilizing the Palace Guard is a risky business.

Go! the Defense Minister had ordered him. Jinrai had not refused. With the minister dropping Seikyou’s name right and left, there was no way he could refuse. He wasn’t about to lose rank over something like this.

On the other hand—

The holy beast closed on him, a red-haired lass of sixteen or so astride its back. Now Jinrai understood who she was. The army of the left had accompanied her to the coronation ceremony and to the receptions immediately following it.

The kirin stopped in the air no more than a few yards off, hovering above the dragon standards. The rider’s gaze fell on him like daggers. At the same time her crystal clear voice called out, her anger evident.

“Jinrai!”

At the sound of his name, Jinrai retreated another step. A stir went through the surrounding soldiers, who showed all signs of heading for cover themselves.

“On whose authority have you come to Takuhou?”

“I—ah—”

“Show me your orders!”

He had to concoct some reason, some excuse, something—but he couldn’t find the words to speak. His thoughts raced yet found no purchase. *She’s just a*

girl, he'd thought. *Another mediocrity like the last empress.* But then where did this vibrant sense of power and authority come from, that made him quake in his boots?

"When did the Palace Guard and its generals resign their commissions and become a gang of self-employed mercenaries?"

"Your Highness, I—"

"And when did your Commander-in-Chief become Seikyou! Tell me you intend to attack Takuhou on Seikyou's orders and I'll have you all branded traitors!"

Jinrai and the surrounding troops could nothing but stand there, rooted to the ground.

"What are you doing?" The kirin's eyes turned on Jinrai. "What are you doing, still standing in the presence of your liege? I heard no leave given."

Jinrai's willpower crumbled. He quickly sank to his knees. Following his lead, the troops knelt, touching the ground with their foreheads.

"Jinrai—"

"Yes!" Jinrai answered, his head brushing the earth.

"I am now giving you a direct order, an Imperial Rescript. Take command of the Palace Guard and march on Meikaku. There you will arrest Gahou, the Province Lord of Wa, and rescue Enho, the superintendent of Kokei in the Province of Ei. He is currently being held against his will in the provincial palace."

"Understood!"

"You will then dispatch a regiment to Gyouten and take Seikyou into custody. Arrest Gahou and Seikyou and free Superintendent Enho without further incident and I will forget this ever happened, both the actions of the Palace Guard and the Wa provincial guard."

"By my word, it shall be done!"

Part XXI

Chapter 78

[21-1] Suzu watched as the creature and its rider alighted upon the wall alongside the Horse Gate.

“A kirin.”

“It is,” came Shoukei’s voice.

“I wonder if it’s proper to bring a kirin to a place like this.”

The question of how to deal with the solid wall of humanity surrounding them was written on all their faces. Suzu hadn’t the slightest idea herself. She wanted to call out to Youko and run to her, but that didn’t feel like the right thing to do.

As they all hesitated, Youko bid the kirin goodbye and turned around. “Hey, everything’s going to be fine.”

Her smile broke the ice. Suzu and Shoukei quickly crossed the short distance between them.

“Everything’s okay? Really?”

“The Palace Guard, too?”

“I dispatched them to Meikaku with orders to arrest Gahou.”

“Yes!” Suzu and Shoukei cheered together. But the people standing stock still behind them still gaped in amazement.

“Koshou! Didn’t you hear? Everything’s going to be fine!”

“Kantai! The Palace Guard will take care of Gahou!”

The two big men blinked in bewilderment. At last, the moment broke. Kantai was the first to sink to his knees.

“Your Highness.”

In a flurry, everybody else copied him. Koshou remained standing, staring

flabbergasted at the kneeling crowd. Sekki called out, “For heaven’s sakes, brother, bow!”

“I, ah, but—”

Youko couldn’t help giggling at the sight of the confused Koshou. “No, you really don’t have to. C’mon, everybody. Stand up.”

Of course, nobody dared lift his head. Only the befuddled Koshou remained standing.

Youko said, “I am sorry that my incompetence should have caused the people of Takuhou so much distress. I wish to apologize to them.” She turned to Koshou. “And to Koshou and all his kith and kin, I express my heartfelt thanks. In Shoukou’s very shadow, you never gave up the good fight. You remained true to the cause. You did what I could not, and for that I am grateful.”

“Well, you know, it was nothing.”

Youko smiled and looked out over the crowds. Heads were popping up here and there. “And to Kantai and his loyal band, I offer my deepest regards. If there is anything you desire, please tell me now.”

Kantai lifted his head with a start. “May I truly ask anything of Your Highness?”

“Anything at all.”

“Well,” Kantai said, glancing on the two men flanking him, and then at Youko. He again bowed his head. “I wish to dispel any doubts about the dismissal of Marquis Koukan, former province lord of Baku. I ask you to please receive the marquis at Court!”

“Koukan—” Youko couldn’t hide her surprise. “Kantai, are you a citizen of Baku Province?”

“My name is Sei Shin, former general in the provincial guard of Baku. And these are two of my regimental commanders—”

The two men Kantai indicated bowed deeply as well. One of them spoke up. “Pardon me, Empress, but I regret to inform Your Highness that soon after the pretender usurped the throne, my troops surrendered to her army. Given the opportunity to wipe away that disgrace, I followed General Sei here.”

"I see," said Youko, gazing down at the three bowed heads. Of course, Kantai was no ordinary person. He was here with his comrades-in-arms, who had once been his officers. And now that she thought about it, Kantai's mates had always showed him the greatest deference.

"There is something I wish to ask you, first. Did you gather here in Wa Province on Koukan's orders?"

"That is indeed the case."

They had met once before at her coronation but Youko couldn't remember his face. Based on the men he had gathered around himself, she could imagine what kind of a person the marquis was.

"Kantai, I wish you to express my appreciation to Koukan for all he has done. Tell your lord that if he can find it in his heart to serve this foolish empress, then I would indeed ask him to visit Gyouten as soon as possible."

Kantai lifted his head and for a moment looked up at her face before bowing once more. "Upon my word, it shall be done!"

Youko nodded and walked over to Koshou, who still seemed lost at sea. She patted him on the arm and pointed at the guard tower. "Why don't we open the gates? There's no need to keep them shut any longer."

"Ah, right," Koshou said with a big grin.

As he hurried along behind her, she glanced over her shoulder and asked, "Is there anything you'd like, Koshou?"

"Nothing comes to mind. Seeing Shoukou brought to justice is enough for me."

"Nothing at all?"

Koshou smiled a bit sheepishly. "This here's all I've been thinking about." He stopped walking and Youko paused as well. "Am I going to be punished?"

Youko sighed to herself. "Why would you think that?"

"I made a pretty big mess of things around here."

"Well, if I punished you, Koshou, wouldn't I have to impose the same penalties

on myself?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Koshou grinned. "Oh, that's right!" he said, looking at her. "Now, I'm just asking you as a mate, see, as a fellow soldier who ate out of the same pot with the rest of us. But there is a small favor I'd like to ask of you."

"What's that?"

"You being some sort of real important person and all, I was thinking maybe you'd know the right people who could make it happen. I was just wondering if you could arrange for Sekki to get into a good school in Ei Province?"

Watching this exchange, Suzu and Shoukei burst out laughing. Even Youko couldn't keep a straight face.

"Eh? What'd I say?"

The ramparts filled with warm laughter brighter than sunlight.

Chapter 79

[21-2] The second regiment of the Palace Guard sent to Meikaku returned to Takuhou five days later.

Youko had stayed behind to help put the ship of state aright in Takuhou. But she eventually got fed up with the people of the city prostrating themselves at her feet right and left and confined herself to the palace compound. There she could converse at ease with Suzu and Shoukei as they inventoried the weapons and prepared meals for the wounded. Koshou was the same old Koshou. Having fought the long battle alongside her from the beginning, Koshou's mates also grew relaxed around her and went back to calling her "Youshi" the same way they had before.

Kantai and his lieutenants remained on a more formal basis with her. That was no doubt because he was a general in the military and it was too late to teach that old dog new tricks.

"The imperial forces have arrived!" came the shout from one of the turrets.

Youko climbed to the top of the palace wall in time to see a horse-drawn wagon entering Takuhou. She ran toward the main palace gate. The wagon stopped as soon as the driver recognized Youko. He climbed down and bowed deeply, then helped a small man off the wagon.

"Enho."

Enho turned his gaze from the soldier to Youko. "Well," he said, his face breaking into a smile, "I see you're doing well."

"Are you all right?"

Enho nodded. His eyes darkened. "Rangyoku and Keikei?"

The question was like a dagger in her chest. She buried her face in her hands. "Rangyoku, she—"

A big hand thumped down on her shoulder. It was Koshou. He pointed at the middle gate. "Don't keep the old guy standing around chatting like this. Find a

place to sit down.”

Youko nodded and Enho’s eyes narrowed a bit. “I believe we’ve met once before.”

“You were a great help to my little brother.”

“And how is he?”

“Doing well, thank you. I’d like to bring him by later, if you don’t mind. He’s been wanting to see you again.”

“I look forward to it.”

Koshou bowed and continued on toward the main gate. At Youko’s urging, she and Enho headed to the middle gate.

“I’m really sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

“I wasn’t at the rike when I should have been. If I had—”

“How is Keikei?”

His soft query stung her ears. “He’s in Gyouten. He seems to have made it through the worst.”

“I see,” Enho said with an understanding nod. “It’s not your fault, Youko. Stop tormenting yourself about it. If anything, it was my responsibility. They were aiming for me, after all.”

Youko lifted her head. “Why would Gahou—or Seikyou—wish to harm you?”

“Well—” said Enho, hanging his head, “I previously lived in San County in Baku Province.”

“At the Evergreen Seminary, you mean?”

“So you’ve heard about it?”

“Then you were there?”

Enho flashed her a self-deprecating smile. “I was. Seikyou made overtures to me there, overtures I rejected. That was the beginning of the trouble.”

“Obviously, Seikyou—”

"The imperial government had uses for the seminary, he said, and we were all to become his underlings. Seikyou is a crook at heart. Cooperating with him could only divert us from the Way. I consulted with the superintendent of the seminary and urged him to turn down Seikyou's offer. As a result, many people lost their lives."

Enho's shoulders slumped as he walked.

"Did they hurt you in any way?"

"I'm as well as I need to be. Don't worry about me. My resolve was to stay fast to the Way, not to sacrifice so many innocent lives in the process. What is such a personal resolution worth, then? Even at my age, this is a question I cannot answer."

"Indeed."

"Now and then, more than teaching the Way, I have to believe that tilling the land or taking up arms to fight would be more meaningful. Look what happens when I try to stay above it all and only teach. The farmer who plants in the spring and gathers his harvest in the fall sees a far greater reward."

"But haven't you been sowing seeds of righteousness among the people all along?"

Enho looked up at Youko. "I see." He smiled and sighed. "Even living as long as I have, some things take a while to sink in. But a young piece of work like yourself gets it right off. There's no need for you to think so little of yourself."

"I suppose so." Youko hung her head for a moment, then nodded. "There's something I like to ask of you, Enho."

"What's that?"

Youko stopped in the courtyard. "I'd like to invite you to the Imperial Court and appoint you Lord Privy Seal."

Enho laughed heartily. "What, put an old fool like me in charge of the Sankou?"

"I need a tutor."

"True," Enho said. "After all the pains the marquis went through to find me a

place to live, I suppose there wouldn't be much point in going home again. But if you'd like me to be there, I'll happily come."

"Thank you very much."

"Okay, then," Enho said with a nod.

"Did the marquis attend the Evergreen Seminary?"

"He did. I wasn't teaching at the time but the principal brought him along. I taught him as I taught you. He was a good student."

"I really have to apologize. I swallowed everything Seikyou told me, hook, line and sinker, and dismissed Koukan."

"Simply admitting that goes a long way in clearing up any misunderstandings." Enho smiled. "Saibou will be happy to hear it."

"Saibou?"

"The chief minister of Baku Province, also an alumnus of the Evergreen Seminary. When Koukan was relieved of his post, so was the chief minister. After that, they became wanted persons. Nevertheless, he visited me several times on Koukan's behalf. I believe you met him on at least one occasion."

"Eh?"

"He came to the rike. The next day you asked me who he was."

The man who wore the veil. "Oh, so that was Saibou?"

"Yes. It was good meeting an old student but painful seeing him brought so low. And it undoubtedly caused Rangyoku and the others a great deal of distress."

Youko looked up at the sky. "But why?"

"Who knows? I think it was just one misunderstanding following another." He tilted his head to the side.

"Still, it's good to know you're okay. I worried that you'd been injured."

"Oh, my injuries were nothing to be worry about. In any event, I'm a fast healer. The brigands who attacked the rike were pretty surprised. That's why they took me with them."

“How’s that?”

Enho smiled and didn’t answer her directly. “Well, at any rate, it’ll be nice to see Kinpa Palace again.”

“Enho Sensei—”

Enho chuckled. “When the time comes, though, you’d better use my proper name, Otsu.”

“Otsu Sensei?”

Enho nodded. “I was born in Shikin, San County, Baku Province. The present-day city of Shishou. My full name is Otsu Etsu, also known as Rou Shou.” Enho laughed heartily. “Emperor Tatsu used to call me Count Shou.”

“Eh?” Youko leaned forward with a puzzled expression. Enho only continued to smile back at her.

Chapter 80

[21-3] “Are you going back?” Suzu asked Youko. Suzu and Youko and Shoukei were staying in the servants quarters in a corner of the palace compound. They were getting ready for bed.

Youko nodded. “I’ve been away for too long. Keiki is starting to take it personally.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right.”

“I’ve finally made up my mind. There’s still a lot of stuff I can’t make heads nor tails of, though.”

“It’s tough being empress.”

Youko nodded again. Suzu and Shoukei exchanged glances. Youko asked, “So what are you two going to do next?”

“Eh?” said Suzu, her eyes widening. Shoukei quizzically tilted her head to one side.

“You came here to see me, right? And so you did.”

“Ah—” Suzu and Shoukei said together.

“Indeed. What to do next?” queried Suzu. Shoukei remained lost in her thoughts.

“You never thought about it?”

“Never crossed my mind,” said Suzu. “Though I ought to go back to Sai at least once and express my gratitude to the Imperial Sai.”

Shoukei stared at the ceiling. “There are people I need to thank and apologize to back in my home country. But I fear I’m still *persona non grata* there.” Then she laughed. “Oh, I do have a promise to keep. I need to take a trip to En.”

“A promise?” asked Suzu.

Shoukei smiled. “I promised Rakushun that I’d see him again and give him a report about what happened.”

Youko furrowed her brow a bit.

Shoukei said, "What's wrong?"

"I suppose news about the unrest in Wa Province has reached En."

"Undoubtedly it has. Rakushun pays close attention to the goings-on in other kingdoms."

"He's probably worried," Youko said. "Be sure to tell him all about it. But emphasize that things were resolved in a less-than-disastrous manner so he can sleep easy." Youko rolled her eyes toward the heavens. "If you can, you might want to play down my actual part in what went on."

Shoukei giggled. "I understand."

The soft laughter filled the room. The conversation momentarily came to an end. Youko suddenly blurted out, "I've still got a problem that needs solving." When Suzu and Shoukei turned to her, Youko tilted her head to the side and asked, "What makes for a good kingdom?"

"A kingdom without any bastards like Shoukou in it," Suzu quickly replied.

Youko smiled thinly. "I get that part, but . . . what kind of lives do you wish to lead? And what sort of kingdom would you wish for in order to accomplish that?"

Shoukei and Suzu thought about it for a minute. The first one to open her mouth was Shoukei. "I hate cold and hunger. That's what made life at the rike so tough. I'm hardly one to talk but I hate being treated badly and being treated with contempt."

Suzu nodded. "I agree completely. It's great to stop having to put up with stuff like that. Because when you are putting up with it, it makes you feel so small."

"Yeah. You just curl in on yourself."

"Sorry," Suzu said, "but I don't think we're answering your question."

As if thinking about something else, Youko shook her head. "No problem. I'm only looking for advice."

"Really?"

Youko nodded, and then said with less certainty, “At any rate, you’ve told me what you’re going to do next. But what about after that?”

Suzu and Shoukei exchanged glances. Shoukei was sitting on the bed, her arms around her knees. She stared at her hands. “I want to learn more. I’m so stupid about everything it’s embarrassing.”

“Me, too,” Suzu chimed in.

“I don’t necessarily mean going to school and all. I mean learning about everything wherever I find it. It’s too bad the Evergreen Seminary isn’t around any more.”

“You want to study—” Youko smiled. “How about this, then? I’ve asked Enho to become Lord Privy Seal and my tutor. Why don’t you come to Kinpa Palace and let Enho teach you there?”

Suzu and Shoukei gaped at her. “Hold on, you’re saying . . .”

“Serious?”

Youko looked at them. “I could use all the help I can get. Two more pairs of hands will make all the difference.” She glanced from Suzu (who seemed to be holding her breath) to Shoukei.

“What about Koshou and Kantai?”

“Of course. I want to find a place for them as well. I absolutely need people I can trust inside the palace, every last one of you.”

Shoukei heaved a great sigh. “Well, you can’t fight fate. I’m willing to give it a try.”

“I’m in. You could ask for the moon, Youko, and you know we couldn’t turn you down.”

“For the moon?”

Suzu giggled and Shoukei unsuccessfully stifled a laugh. Youko couldn’t help but join in. Their gentle laughter echoed off the walls of the small room.

Afterword

Gyouten, the capital of the Kingdom of Kei. The empress finally returned from her “study abroad” to a palace bathed in the warm rays of the sun.

For the next five days, she secluded herself within her chambers. The former prime minister, Seikyou; the former province lord of Wa, Marquis Gahou; and the former governor of Shisui Prefecture, Shoukou, were arrested. The empress herself signed the warrants, to the great amazement of the ministers. Some objected but could hardly voice their objections to the empress, who would not even venture into the inner court.

During the empress's absence, the Privy Council had fallen into disarray. Behind the scenes, some plotted and conspired, fearing that their sins might be revealed, dooming them to Seikyou's fate. But for the time being, such scheming played out in the shadows and behind closed doors.

The Imperial Court will be thrown into chaos, the ministers murmured amongst themselves. Losing Seikyou meant the balance of power would be thrown to the anti-Seikyou faction, and that was where they all considered shifting their allegiances as well.

Those five days saw a constant tumult of rumors and shifting expectations. At last the empress emerged and assembled every minister and bureaucrat of note in the Gaiden, the outer palace.

The ministers gathered in the Gaiden were startled to see there the unfamiliar face of the previously-dismissed province lord of Baku, Koukan, along with his entourage. The Gaiden buzzed with excitement. When the empress appeared, escorted by the Saiho to the throne, the state of confusion was only heightened. The empress wore ministerial dress no more elaborate than what the ministers wore. By shunning her imperial robes, this monarch, whose name was recorded in the Census of Heaven while she was barely yet a woman, somewhat deflected

the inherent scorn directed against *empresses*.

Their doubts and confusion notwithstanding, the ministers bowed, touching their foreheads to the floor. At the same time, a voice rang out, “Raise your heads!” They knelt and straightened their backs.

“To start with, I would like to apologize for my long absence.”

With no introduction from the Chousai, the empress simply began to speak. The confusion and consternation of the ministers only grew. Long-established custom held that the empress did not speak to her subjects and her subjects did not speak to her. Rather, written notes would be passed to the chamberlain, she would read them and then whisper her response in the chamberlain’s ear. The chamberlain would then repeat her words to her subordinates. Of course, no kingdom followed this custom to the letter. But in any event, no ruler spoke so directly to her subjects.

“I did not intend to waste so much of your time. I am sorry for taxing your patience.”

She paused.

“I will not say much about those individuals arrested several days ago. It is the duty of the Ministry of Fall to bring their sins to light and exact the proper penalties. However, I advise them to keep in mind that I personally signed the arrest warrants.”

The ministers caught their collective breath. No one doubted that this thinly-veiled threat was a direct challenge to the Ministry of Fall: if they tried to go easy on the defendants, grease a few palms, and look the other way, they’d have to answer for their actions.

“A while back, I asked the Saiho to mobilize his provincial guard. It didn’t happen. The generals of his provincial guard seem to be suffering from a chronic ailment. That being the case, carrying out their duties must be an onerous burden. I recommend their early retirements.”

Even more started reactions this time.

“In order to fill the vacant posts, I have made requests of four individuals. First of all, the commanders of the Palace Guard will be transferred to the

aforementioned provincial guard.”

Voices were raised in protest: “Surely you jest!”

The empress ignored them. “In their place, I hereby appoint Sei Shin, former commander of the Baku provincial army of the left, regimental commander of the Palace Guard army of the left. Kantai.”

“Yes!” The general deeply bowed his head.

“As for the armies of the center and right, I will act upon Kantai’s recommendations. Kantai, please put the Palace Guard in order.”

“By your command, Your Majesty.”

“Koukan.”

“Yes.”

The voice of the man who spoke was young. He was a bright and sagacious man of around thirty. Everyone there thought incredulously: *This is the province lord of Baku?*

“I hereby appoint you Chousai. Please put the Imperial Court in order.”

“You can’t be serious!” rose many voices in objection.

Again, she ignored them. “I hereby appoint Saibou, the former Baku prime minister, province lord of Wa. Furthermore, I have summoned Count Shou to the Imperial Court and hereby appoint him Lord Privy Seal. Together with these appointments, you may expect that a fair number of ministerial positions will be shuffled accordingly.”

The empress looked over her audience. “Those of you with clear consciences have no cause for dismay. Having been ministers of the Late Empress Yo does not mean you will be treated poorly, just as having graduated from the Evergreen Seminary does not mean you will be accorded unwarranted favor.”

Poised on the throne, the empress said, “Everyone stand!” The room buzzed with confusion, the ministers glancing at each other as they timidly got to their feet. The empress scanned the assembly. She nodded and turned to the Saiho at her side. “This is something I wish Keiki to make note of as well.”

She said, “I do not care to be worshipped in the customary manner.”

“Your Highness!”

The empress had to smile at the sound of the Saiho’s scolding voice. “It is certainly pleasing to hear respect paid and gratitude expressed. But I do not like the ranking and ordering of human beings. I cannot abide greeting someone and not being able to see his face. I understand the need for rules of decorum and propriety. But being kowtowed to and watching people kowtow to others leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Your Highness, please hold on a moment!”

She shushed him and addressed the ministers. “Henceforth, with the exception of established rituals and ceremonies, and receptions for guests of honor from other kingdoms, nobody kowtows to anybody! It will be sufficient to bow while either standing or kneeling.”

“Your Highness!”

To the Saiho’s attempts to restrain her, the empress curtly responded, “The matter is settled.”

“There are people who may feel they are being disrespected and become enraged.”

“And what of them?”

“Your Highness!”

“I do not understand people who cannot feel secure in their positions without forcing others to grovel before them.”

The Saiho was speechless. The ministers gaped with open mouths.

“I do not understand what pride means to people like that. What’s worse, whenever a man’s made to scrape and bow, it eats away at his self-esteem. That’s a problem just waiting to happen.”

“But—”

“You know, Keiki,” the empress said to the Taiho, “when you’re really grateful to somebody, when you feel real respect for them, you bow your head naturally.”

You bow your head to show what's in your heart. Simply going through the motions provides no measure of a man's soul. Turning such a bow into obeisance is no different than placing your foot on the back a man's head and grinding his face into the dirt."

"But people must be taught by example."

"I do not intend to encourage insolence. We should treat others with respect. That should be obvious. What I'm saying is, when it comes to those who lack the character to do so, there's nothing more that can be done by means of coercion."

"That is true, but—"

"I wish to be empress to all the people of Kei." Her voice was loud and clear. "You only have to look at Shoukou to see the fate of those who use their position to force respect from their subjects and trample the rest under their feet. And the fate of those who allow themselves to be so trampled should be clear as well. No man is anyone's slave. No man is born to be a slave. Those who are oppressed and do not yield; who face disasters and do not break; who suffer injustice and do not fear to answer injustice with justice; who are ruled by beasts and do not fawn at their feet—these are the kinds of free people I wish the citizens of Kei to become. We are all the captains of our own souls. And our first command is to hold our heads high in the presence of others."

She finished speaking and looked out over the audience of ministers, bureaucrats, and functionaries. "You have asked me along which path I wish to lead this kingdom. Have I given you a sufficient enough answer?"

Only their eyes looked back at her. No voices responded.

"Then by your assent, the act of kowtowing is abolished! This I proclaim as my Inaugural Rescript!"

From **THE CHRONICLES OF KEI**

The Annals of the Red Child

In the Second Month of the Second Year of Sekiraku, a Revolt arose in the City of Takuhou, Shisui Prefecture, Wa Province. The Prefectural Governor, Seki On, a cruel Tyrant, lusted after Wealth, burdened the People with heavy Taxes, waxed full of Pride, and ruled the Countryside by the Sword.

The Peasantry feared and resented the Tyrant even as they served him, seeing and hearing no Evil, yet holding Malice in their Hearts.

At long last, in the Second Month, the publically-spirited Citizens of Takuhou raised the Banner of Shu On and rebelled. The Province Lord of Wa set forth to destroy Takuhou. Supporting him in this Course of Action, the Taisai forged Orders and dispatched Troops to Takuhou.

Her Highness, by means of those same Soldiers, struck back at the Marquis, stripped the Taisai of his Rank and Privileges, and brought Peace to Takuhou.